**The Encourager. May 8 2022 Acts 9:20-31**

We were the last family I knew to get a telephone when I was young. My mother was deeply concerned about how having a telephone may compromise the privacy of our family. Though all her siblings had telephones she was somewhat “suspicious” of this new technology. We only eventually got a phone when I was a teenager, as my brother needed one for his work and throughout my parent’s life they had a private (unlisted) phone number at my mother’s insistence. There is often a natural cautiousness and even suspicion about new things, new inventions, new organisations, new churches. The early Christian movement faced these same issues. Pioneers tread a lonely path and can be prone to misunderstanding and slander. Last week we read about the turnaround which happened in the life of Saul and the crucial role that Ananias played in his early growth as a follower of Jesus.

The story continues on today when we encounter another of those people who helped Saul along the way in his faith journey. Saul is in the process of beginning to live out the commission upon his life of sharing Jesus with others in the Israelite community and beyond. However, his reputation has preceded him and understandably people of every persuasion are deeply suspicious of this *“turn-coat”.* Is he really genuine? How can they be sure? Is it a ploy to catch them off guard and trap them? Could this persecutor of the early church really have swapped sides? Saul sought to join with the followers of Jesus in Damascus in preaching about Jesus in their community, curiosity was aroused, some were convinced by his words, others however sought to kill him, and Saul has his first experience of a supportive Christian community as some band together to get him safely out of the city. Then we read of him going to Jerusalem – this is likely to have been some time later – and he seeks to join the early Christian movement in Jerusalem, but there was widespread fear of Saul, generally the followers of Jesus here did not believe he could be trusted.

In the midst of this challenge one man arose who chose to believe Saul. His name is Barnabus. In Acts chapter 4 we read that the apostles gave the name of Barnabus to a man named Joseph – Barnabus means “son of encouragement”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Though Barnabus is mentioned 23 times in the book of Acts and 5 times in Paul’s letters, this appears to be the only time in the three year lectionary when his name is mentioned in a reading. He is a character well worth exploring.

Barnabus facilitated the acceptance of Saul/Paul into the community of the apostles in Jerusalem. Our text tells us that *“Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles”* in the Greek these phrases carry with them the notion of “taking him by the hand”, supporting him through the process, Barnabus acts as a reconciler, enabling understanding, interceding. He clearly valued the unity and breadth of the early Christian church, he was a “community builder, able to promote and sustain warm and constructive personal relations.”[[2]](#footnote-2). He was prepared to speak up for Saul in the midst of understandable hesitation on the part of others in the early Christian community. Barnabus clearly aimed to build bridges between the Jerusalem church and the new Christian communities. Barnabus was a peacemaker who deeply valued the unity of the early Christian movement.

Barnabus is a man of significant warmth, understanding and grace. Some of his own countrymen had taken the message of Jesus to Antioch. Barnabus was well respected by the early Christian movement in Jerusalem, so they sent him to check on this work.

When he arrived he “ *…came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord.”[[3]](#footnote-3)* Barnabus saw God’s grace at work in people and was prompted to support the work of God, it took humility, faith and an attentiveness to God to see that. So Barnabus supports this work. He invested personally in this work and saw the church grow. He identified that the early Christian communities needed teaching and support to keep moving forward, they needed to be deeply, strongly established so that they could deal appropriately with the persecution which would undoubtedly come.

Barnabus decided to go and find Saul and bring him back to Antioch to continue to assist this young church to grow. Barnabus recognised in Saul preaching and teaching gifts which could strengthen this church. He was a man of humble faith, quite prepared to recognise the gifts of others and to allow them to shine. He was secure in his own identity and giftedness, he did not need to cling to the role he had been exercising in Antioch but rather he could encourage Saul to take a leading role in this work. He appears to be very comfortable supporting Paul, yet he is also happy to take a leading role when that is needed. They remained here working together for a year, and the generosity which flowed out of this community prompted them to give to their fellow believers in the church in Judea which was suffering from a famine. The gift was to be taken to them by Saul and Barnabus. Once again, now in very practical terms Barnabus is commissioned to go and encourage another group of Jesus followers.

The church in Antioch grew and various prophets and teachers arose there. Barnabus was listed amongst this group. The church there, prompted by the Spirit, set apart Saul and Barnabus for their first Missionary journey. They visited a wide variety of towns, and their message of Jesus was warmly received by some and caused offence to others. The church grew but they also suffered persecution. They left the cities when they were persecuted and took the message to the next town, but they returned to each city, *“There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.’ And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Barnabus’ ministry of encouragement took many forms, but it was a prominent and consistent feature of his discipleship.

Barnabus and Saul did not allow the rejection they experienced to diminish their efforts to work tirelessly in presenting the gospel to others. It is easy for us to become preoccupied with isolated experiences of rejection and become distracted from the work God calls us to do. The reactions of people – acceptance or rejection – could never be the basis of their joy.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Their joy was an overflow of the work of God’s Spirit within them a work of grace. Therefore, the reactions of the people -acceptance or rejection – could be viewed from a very different perspective. They were responsible to be faithful to the calling of God upon them, but the results could be left in the hands of God. Together with Saul, Barnabus went on to represent the Gentile believers at the Jerusalem Council.[[6]](#footnote-6) They came back to Antioch and continued in ministry there together. However, some time later, Saul was keen return to encourage the churches which they had ministered to previously. Barnabus was keen to take John Mark with them on this journey, but Saul disagreed, as John Mark had left them earlier when they were working in a difficult place. The argument created a division between Saul and Barnabus and they went their separate ways in ministry with Barnabus taking John Mark with him. It is interesting that Barnabus was the one who wanted to be gracious to John Mark, giving him a second chance.

Our churches, our communities and our world need people like Barnabus. The example of Barnabus challenges us about the significant role that encouragement plays in all our lives.

Who is your encourager? Who do you encourage? How do we respond when we do not receive the encouragement we crave?

We never actually hear who encourages Barnabus. Barnabus challenges us to be prepared to see more in people than others may see. He encourages us to keep our minds open to the insights which God’s Spirit can give us. To recognise that the grace of God is always available and operating towards us and all people. He encourages us to use the gifts that God has given us and not to be distracted by discouragement or difficulties.

1. Acts 4:36 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996) 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acts 11:23-24 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 14:22-23 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Llyod J. Ogilvie, *The Preachers Commentary: Acts,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1983) 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Acts 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)