

St. Barnabas the Apostle (12.06.2016)

“You are my friends, if you do what I command you”

Through the written word and the spoken word,
may we know your living word, Jesus Christ our
Saviour

My first experience of friendship was with my twin brother, David. From a very young age we were constant companions usually playing football or cricket together for hour on hour. He'd be Denis Compton to my Brian Statham, or Stanley Matthews to my Tom Finney. Mum would have to call us in from the field behind our house for tea on many occasions. How fortunate was that?

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus calls his disciples friends rather than servants. Surely then as a Church of Christ we should spend time reflecting on the sacred benefits of friendship? Good friendships as I had with my brother, and indeed still have, though certainly of a different nature, are highly valued and reveal a considerable

amount of the God who calls us to befriend him in our Gospel reading. Dinah Mulock, a Victorian from the Midlands, in her book “A Life for a Life” wonderfully describes the nature of good friendship:

“Oh, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort, of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts, nor measure words, but pour them all out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then, with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.”

Now I don't know about you, but I haven't experienced too many friendships of such inexpressible comfort. Is this the challenging nature of friendship Jesus asks both towards him and towards our fellow Christians? “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” And what does he command us to do? “That you love one another as I have loved you.” Oh the demands of Christian fellowship and relationships, of Christian love and friendship. No wonder we constantly

confess our wrong doings and seek God's forgiveness. Yet God has given us many role models, many saints, who show us the way of Christian love and friendship. Today we are celebrating one such Saint, Barnabas.

We know, in essence, very little about St. Barnabas the Apostle. He appears mainly in the Acts of the Apostles and a few of Paul's epistles. Yet we know he was a leader of considerable influence in the early Christian Church. Born Joseph, a Cypriot Jew, he undertook the first Christian missionary journey with Paul to Cyprus, and is recognised as the founder of the Cypriot Orthodox Church. He was given the name Barnabas, which means son of encouragement or consolation, after he sold a field that belonged to him and laid the proceeds at the Apostle's feet.

But it is with Paul that Barnabas is best associated. While others may have been anxious over the sudden conversion of a man who had previously so cruelly persecuted members of the early Christian

Church, Barnabas, as we hear in this morning's reading, went to Tarsus to find Paul to bring him to Antioch and then to Jerusalem to introduce him to the Apostles and other early Christians. Here we see Barnabas playing the role of the go-between, a mediator and diplomat, no doubt a resilient, patient character smoothing the way for people to get on with each other. He can perhaps be seen as a gentle man who listened to others to guide them in to the ways of peace. I think we could benefit from a Barnabas now as we listen to the insults and the shoutings which are accompanying the EU referendum campaign.

With Paul, Barnabas supported the admission of Gentiles as well as Jews to the early Christian Church, promoting the concept of all being one in Christ. He must have been an excellent preacher as wherever he went a train of conversions to the faith followed. He must have been a great friend indeed to many and especially to Paul, where he no doubt acted as a great foil. I can just picture him

putting his arm round Paul's shoulder and saying, "Steady on, my friend, some of these things you are saying in your letters, it's a bit strong you know. Not everyone will take it." We all need a friend like Barnabas now and then. Barnabas the generous one, considering others before himself. The apostle who loved his own people – no wonder he should be remembered with love and be seen as an example of a good Christian friend and someone who followed Jesus' command to "love one another as I have loved you." As we heard in our reading Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

If being a good friend to our Christian brothers and sisters seems difficult, how much more difficult is it to love one another as Jesus loves us, to love one's neighbour as oneself? The Greek word for Christian love is agape. This is not a feeling as it means doing what is best for someone despite your feelings for them. We are not asked to like everyone – heaven forbid! Agape is a sacrificial

love that gives and gives some more even when there is no return. It is an act of service in the way that Jesus washing his disciples' feet was an act of service.

As we celebrate the Queen's 90th Birthday, I have to express my admiration for a woman who has shown such an act of service to our country over 64 years of her reign. Tom Wright wrote;

“When a ruler really does love her subjects, and when this becomes clear by generous and warm hearted actions, she creates a context in which the subjects can and will love her in return.”

The Queen, I believe, has created that context for many. Happy Birthday, Your Majesty!

It is in this sense of service to each other, of loving, that we act as friends of Jesus and each other. Friends are the flowers in the garden of life; friends are trees under which to shelter. Jesus Christ entrusted his future in the world to his friends. We are his friends and as we gather here to share

bread and wine in remembrance of him, as we are in communion with him and with each other, let us be determined, like Barnabas, to seek more fully that spirit of service and faithful Christian friendship:

“Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter: whoever finds one has found a treasure.

Faithful friends are beyond price; no amount can balance their worth.

Faithful friends are life-saving medicine; and those who fear the Lord will find them.”

Bill Pattinson

Feast of St. Barnabas, 2016

