

Sunday 17th July 2022. Barnabas – A Man of Welcome; Acts 9:10-30 & 11:19-30.

Also Mark 1:16-20.

‘When Saul came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles...’
9:26-27.

I don't know what image you have of Barnabas. Acts 11 describes as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” I always imagined a slightly big man, tall, beard, big laugh... I think I've said before – a Big version of Gimli out of Lord of the Rings. Maybe that says more about men and the films I've watched!

We have been talking about Everybody Welcome – a short series on some of the elements that make up a community where everybody is welcome. We shared about Jesus words ‘ I was a stranger and you welcomed me in’ – Everybody welcome begins with that – we are a welcoming community to the new person, the person who is not yet friend... We shared about Paul's words in Romans 14-15 – Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. A Church is place of great unity and yet there is often great diversity. Everybody Welcome means we live with, that joy and at times tension of diversity, while focusing primarily on all that unites us and seek to welcome and accept one another as Christ as done – he is our model of welcome. Last week, Everybody Welcome means a Listening Community – Jesus let the woman he had healed of internal bleeding, tell the whole story – he gave her time, space, attention and he genuinely listened. Everybody Welcome means I am welcome when I am present and when I speak, whether I bring news of joy and healing, or of struggle and deep pain.

Final one today – Barnabas, we focus on, a man of welcome.

Barnabas.

We already know things about him. He is from Cyprus –from the tribe of Levi – he had sold a field he owned – and remember, traditionally Levities did not own land, so however he owned it, it was quite a rare possession. And gave it to the apostles in Jerusalem to help people in need (Acts 4).

In fact, Barnabas was not his original name. It was Joseph. He is renamed or given a second name by the apostles – like Jesus told Simon, you shall we be called Peter.

I had the pleasure of 3 months in Kenya, at a seminary for Anglican clergy. I bring friends with a number of the students and particularly those from the Nandi tribe.

We got into chatting about names and they gave me another name – to add to my existing names – Grant Norman Crowe. Each of them would have, as one of their names, a name indicating when they were born.

First it was Kip – for a boy.

They asked when I was born and I shared how I was told by my Mum I was born sometime between 5-6pm. They said, the name they would give me was Kiprot-tich – Kip for a boy. Rot-tich – the name given to when the cattle are brought in from pasture which happens between 5-8. Kip-rot-tich.

Joseph is called Barnabas and that name meant “a Son of Encouragement.” I do not believe this was due to that one act of sacrificial giving to the church. I believe it reflected a character and a lifestyle they saw.

And this encouragement is shown later with Saul.

Saul tries to join the disciples. It is natural he would try. He had been part of the church in Damascus for 3 years. Yet it is also natural that the believers in Jerusalem would be concerned. His persecution had been a vicious one – still fresh in memory. Acts 8

describes the actions of Saul, using a Gk phrase, which points to the attacks of a wild animal. It reminds me in Fellowship of the Ring, when the humans, hobbits, elves and dwarfs and Gandalf, meet in Rivendell, to discuss what is to be done with the ring. In the midst of the arguments Gimli – a dwarf – shouts ‘never trust an elf.’ He looks on the past and the pain between the two peoples. The disciples look back on all Saul did and controlled – never trust Saul.

It says they were afraid of him. I wonder how did that fear show itself? Did they run away? Or was it more subtle? When he came to meetings, no one spoke to him? When he asked where things were, no one told him. He was not invited to the church away day, the life group, told where the church service was that week and at what time? Not told the mobile phone number to message or how to gather, as some persecuted Christians for example in persecuted parts of East Africa, only know the day of the gathering and then 30 mins before, message people where they will meet. Saul was out of all that...

What would have happened if Saul had not been invited in?

Barnabas steps in – he acts as his name – son of encouragement. As I believe Ananias had helped Saul become part of the church in Damascus – Ananias knew all about Saul’s past as, did many in that city we heard – yet Ananias knew Saul was converted – Jesus had told him, he saw him healed, there when he was baptized, saw him filled with the Spirit.

Barnabas shares what he knows of Saul – his conversion – he met the Lord Jesus on the road – and also how he witnessed publically in Damascus. He builds fellowship. Saul is welcomed in – no longer on the edge but now part of the community. Yet he needed someone to help that happen. Saul wasn’t even welcomed on the Sunday morning –he needed a son of encouragement. Sometimes someone is welcomed on a Sunday but they cannot become part of the main community. Part of our role can be to invite them in, to be a build bridge builder, to introduce them to people – as

Barnabas did.

So Barnabas – a man of welcome – he draws people in, he helps Saul become part of the community.

Acts 11.

Barnabas is a man of discernment.

This is something new he experiences. A new community. It is the first international church in the history of the Church. It is a church made up of religious refugees – those who had fled from Saul – and locals. It was a church made up of Jews and Gentiles worshipping comfortably together.

He may or may not have enjoyed all he saw. He may have had his own views. He may have had his own preferences. But the key thing - discerns “evidence of the grace of God” – he sees when God is at work. He see what unites him with them, over diversity.

He is a man of celebration and encouragement ‘but he is glad and encourages them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts’ – he knows the Lord is here, he is blessing and the main thing, keep with the Lord. He celebrates what he sees. He is glad.

As you meet other believers – what makes you ‘glad’ – what do you celebrate before God? Paul celebrates the good things he hears about the churches – so many of his letters begin with celebrating what he has heard / seen – I thank God for you brothers and sisters, for your faith is growing more and more; (2 Thessalonians); we thank God because we have herd of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints. Colossians. And it is not

celebrating what is a church. Philemon we read that week – a personal letter and Paul says: I thank God for your love for all the saints, your love has given me great joy and encouragement because you, brogther, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

What do you see? What can you celebrate? What can you thank God for in that person? It may be someone you have known for years in the church? What about the new person? As you talk and listen? Welcome – celebrate the grace of God in that person...

Barnabas is a son of encouragement – he encouraged the church, encouraged among the church. The best man to come I'd say...

We see two more elements to him: a man who admits he needs help and a risk taker. 'A great number have been brought to the Lord' – but he goes to Tarsus – 169km away – to find Saul Paul who is preaching in the area of his home city (Galatians 1:21-24).

He admits he cannot do it all. Or he admits that God's vision for this church is much greater than he can fulfil.

Barnabas – realised he needs help.

He is a risk taker. The risk is Saul. For along time I thought – great choice!

But who is Saul? Well, Saul is the reason, indirectly this church exists, isn't he? The church was formed by persecution, brutal persecution that Saul led or initiated – Acts 8 says 'Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.' Imagine the street where you live – there a few roads where you know there are quite a few fellow believers. Imagine you are looking out the window and you see the police, and believers being dragged out, you keep watching, you see the next house three doors down, you've been to their church, you run to get a suitcase, get some clothes, there is banging at your door, you run out the back door just in time to see police coming in your yard... The first Christians in Antioch fled that. They fled 600 km to get away from that man. And Barnabas goes and gets him.

Did they know Barnabas' plan or did it just happen – Big Barnabas – big booming voice, comes into the gathering and says 'I'm here' and I'm brought a friend – do you know him?! Maybe people say – yes we do know him, he is the reason we are here and not in Jerusalem. That is why I had to take my kids and wife with me 600 km to this city. That is risk.

Of course, it works out fine – we know that. But it was a risk. It could have been divisive. He had to trust that these men and women had forgiven him or would forgive him and welcome him as a true brother in Christ.

Saul is accepted. It is beautiful. We see a church of acceptance and love and generosity who knew the acceptance, generosity and love of God shown to them in Christ. Christ prayed – father forgive them for they know not what they are doing, as Stephen imitated Christ when he was stoned to death. Christ is said – love one another as I have loved you. Saul is welcomed in, as Christ has welcomed him.

I think we see deep community in action here.

Barnabas also fully welcomes Saul. There is a concept that welcome is only about what happens at the door or after a service. But welcome is much deeper and broader. Welcome – for a community to be deep – is about a person not only being welcomed into the service but into the life and community of the church, and being allowed to use their spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, express their personality and share or use their life experience. Saul could have been kept at the margins but he is fully welcomed into that church.

Conclusion.

Barnabas.

A man of welcome.

He built bridges to help Saul join the community in Jerusalem.

A man who saw what united the community – the grace of God – over its incredible diversity he had encountered. He celebrated the much good he saw and encouraged them to press on.

A man who drew people in – took risks even – by involving Saul. Saul was not just invited to join the community in Antioch but his gifts, talents, strengths, life experience, passions, were drawn in. Saul was welcomed fully into that community.

You could say: The Antioch church have encountered the generous gospel – all are invited to believe and all are brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. They have seen

the generous nature of Barnabas both in the affirming of their ministries and mission and their church community. Modelling to them what community looks like, through his actions. They have been generous in their acceptance and welcome of Saul.

Shall we pray...

Heavenly Father,
you have welcomed us into your
kingdom
and your heart's desire
is to draw every human being to
yourself.
Grant us clear eyes to see people as
you see them,
sensitive feet to stand in their shoes,
and warm smiles to welcome them in
your name.
Give us such generous hearts,

that our church becomes a foretaste
of heaven
where every soul you send us, finds
their loving home
in the community of your Son our
Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen