

SERMON

Journey to Restoration (Acts 15:36-41)

In Swavesey where we use to live there was a family, a large family, or at least the generation was above mine. The family at one time owned the local bakery which supplied its own shops and several others in a around Cambridge. We lived three doors away from it and during the summer you could here the vans being loaded up with trays of cakes and such like. The trays were metal and so clanged often against the metal floor of the vans. Great as they left the yard to deliver at 5.00am!

The family also owned a road haulage business in the village, but that had long gone before we arrived. During my time there I conducted the funerals for the last three of a generation and the three were Mod, Dump and Trip, or to give them their proper names it was Maurice, Doris and Leslie. So why Mod, Dump and Leslie or Les. The only explanation I was given was that this is what they had always been called. It was a nickname which stuck. Funnily enough the practice of giving nicknames to people in the village was dying out with that generation.

Tonight one of the characters in our reading is called by his nickname. This is Barnabas. We first meet Barnabas in Acts 4:36, page 1096. Let us begin at verse 32

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.” (Acts 4:32-37 NIV)

So we have Joseph, who is also called, or some translated say that his surname was, or it can be has an alternative name, Barnabas. So Joseph we know better as Barnabas, but there is still a twist to come. Luke, the author of Acts, very helpfully put in **Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement)**, but unfortunately the word for Encouragement is *paraklesis* and Barnabus is spelt believe it or not, *barnabas*. The two words are dissimilar and Barnabas is an Aramaic word meaning *son of rest* or *Son or son of Nabas* or *Nebo* which means *prophecy*. It gets a little confusing, but we have Joseph, called Barnabas which many will tell you means encouragement because he had the gift of encouragement, but Barnabas does not mean encouragement. People today are called a Barnabas if they are an encouragement.

What do we know about Barnabas?

- His real name was Joseph
- He was a Levite
- He was a Cyprian and so his family had left Jerusalem (he had relatives in Jerusalem)
- He was not poor – he sold a field to help the early church
- He was a prophet and a teacher – Acts 13:1

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.” (Acts 13:1 NIV)

- He was a trusted leader – Acts 11:19

“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.” (Acts 11:19-24 NIV)

We also read there that

- He was full of the Holy Spirit
- He was full of faith
- He was an evangelist
- He was man of courage because he befriended Paul when it was no fashionable to do so. Acts 9:26

“When Paul, who is still being Saul at this point 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. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 9:26-27 NIV)

No wonder Paul and Barnabas team up and you can read about them together in chapters 9, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.

So what about the other characters. The first is Paul, or Saul as he was known first. It is in Acts 13 where the name change comes, verse 9

“Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.” (Acts 13:9-11 NIV)

No real explanation there either for the name change! The friend that Sue and I have in Togo, he has two names. He was born with the name Bamako. However when you are converted you take a Christian name, or it seems to be a European, Western name and his is Patrick but he never uses it. His wife we only knew as Collette, her Christian name, her western name. No problems until as a church we wanted to fly her from Stansted airport to Newcastle airport by Easyjet or Ryanair and her passport was in her African name, which was not the name we had booked her ticket in, so we had to pay for a new ticket for her!

So we have Paul, and what can we say about him. Let him speak for himself.

“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.” (Philippians 3:5-6 NIV)

or as the Message puts it

“...You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting Christians; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.”
(Philippians 3:4-6 MSG)

Paul, as we know, had a zealous personality and let nothing stand in his way. This was his personality and this is why God had to stop him in such a spectacular way on the Road to Damascus! Some people are like that. Others are quieter, more accommodating maybe, but not Paul – he went straight for things.

Paul, so different from Barnabas. Barnabas the encourager, the helper, the one who gave people a leg up, emotionally and spiritually, if not materially as well, beside Paul the go-getter, the activist, at times the express train, but the problem with express trains is that they cause a lot of damage if you get in the way. Barnabas and Paul probably worked well together. They were dissimilar and so they could work as a team because they were not vying for the same thing. However they were both evangelists and teachers and listened to God and were close to God and so went forward together complimenting each other's ministry, which is why from chapter 9 they are so often spoken of in the same breath. Moses had Aaron, Dwight L Moody had Ira Sankey, Billy Graham had George Beverly Shea, Morecombe had Wise, Paul had Barnabas. They were a double act as shown by Acts 9 through to Acts 15 then we read the words

“They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left,...and went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” (Acts 15:39-41 NIV)

And Acts then tends to be the Paul and Silas story. Silas, who only comes on the scene in Acts 15!

So we have now need to look at the real third member of this drama. Mark or John Mark, or John. He is first mentioned for a prayer meeting taking place at his house. It was a prayer meeting for Peter who was in prison and we read in Acts 12:12

“When this had dawned on him (that is Peter that he was free from prison in a miraculous way), he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance...” (Acts 12:12-13 NIV)

Obviously the home was not a small one as it had an outer locked gate and also had space for many people to gather. So we know that Mark's family were

- fairly well off

We also know that

- Mark was a cousin of Barnabas. Colossians 4:10

“My fellow-prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas...” (Colossians 4:10 NIV)

- He was released to accompany Barnabas and Paul when they began their first missionary journey going from Jerusalem to Antioch.
- However he deserts them as they are sailing from Paphos on Cyprus to Pamphylia, on the southern shore of Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. Instead of going to Perga in Pamphylia, John Mark returns to Jerusalem. We are not told the real reason why. Many have conjectured, but it is all speculation!

Then the big parting all over John Mark. Barnabas wanted him with them, Paul didn't. Verse 37

“Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.” (Acts 15:37-38 NIV)

So what were they to do? Reach a compromise. But what compromise was there? Barnabas wanted Mark, Paul didn't. They couldn't take half of Mark along; it was an all or nothing. So sadly we read in verse 39

“They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.” (Acts 15:39-40 NIV)

They split up and the rest then Acts become a story about Paul and Silas, his new travelling companion, while Barnabas goes to Cyprus, his home, with Mark. Barnabas is never again mentioned in the book of Acts.

However we do read of Barnabas within Paul's letters. He is mentioned in Galatians, 1 Corinthians and Colossians. In Galatians 2, page 1169 we read

“Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with *Barnabas*. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. [This matter arose] because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and *Barnabas* the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.” (Galatians 2:1-13 NIV)

Barnabas is spoken of here with affection and not malice, but we do not know whether this letter was written before or after the sharp dispute took place.

So what about 1 Corinthians where we read in 1 Corinthians 9:6, page 1150

“This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me. Don’t we have the right to food and drink? Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?” (1 Corinthians 9:3-6 NIV)

So we have again that Paul speaks of Barnabas in affection tones, and it seems as if this letter is written after the split, after they went their separate ways.

And finally Colossians 4:10, page 1185 where we read

“My fellow-prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)” (Colossians 4:10 NIV)

Where it is not so much Barnabas who is mentioned as John Mark, the deserter, but this deserter is now with Paul in prison, which is well after the split.

Several things come out from this sharp disagreement and split which speak of the Journey of Restoration

- Paul did not bad-mouth Barnabas at any time. It seems as if Barnabas was still a big name in the early church as Paul is able to cite him when writing to different churches.
- Paul still held Barnabas in high respect.
- Paul still had an affectionate spot for Barnabas.
- Paul must have met up with Mark at some time, we do not know whether it was with or without Barnabas and given him a second chance.

At times when we have a sharp dispute with someone we will want revenge, we will want to retaliate, we will talk about them behind their backs in derogatory ways. We will not do as Paul did. As one person put it over that incident in Acts 15

The partnership was broken, but not the fellowship

As some of us learnt yesterday, we are all different with different personalities, and at times different personalities can clash, but that does not mean a falling out of fellowship with one another, a leaving of the church and moving on to another, or stop working for God at all.

Let us take the example of Paul and Barnabas and keep on working for God, even after the dispute – God then had two teams working for him out of the original one. Also to keep in fellowship with the other person, building them up in the Lord and listening to their ideas and supporting what they have done.