

## Sunday 11 June 2023 – St Barnabas – Trinity 1

### Acts 11. 19-end

### John 15. 12-17

It's not often we get to celebrate the feast day of an apostle on a Sunday, so today it is worth marking the occasion. Who was this Christian leader Barnabas, whose name crops up frequently in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of St Paul ?

Barnabas was an apostle, but not one of the Twelve. He was a Jewish Cypriot and a Levite (a member of the tribe of Levi). He introduced Paul to the other apostles. Paul and Barnabas were sent together to Antioch, and undertook the first missionary journey which began in Cyprus. At the Council of Jerusalem Barnabas supported the Gentile Christians. In spite of positive beginnings Paul and Barnabas later quarrelled and separated; Barnabas returned to Cyprus and evangelised it. Paul's references to him in his letters to the Galatians and Corinthians probably indicate a wider mission beyond Cyprus. However legend claims that he was martyred at Salamis in Cyprus on this day in the year 61. Above all his main title to fame is the prominent part he took in the development of the infant Christian Church.

The first reference to Barnabas comes in Acts 4, verses 34-end: "There was not a needy person among them (the followers of Christ), for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph by name, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet." This reminds us, doesn't it, of the example of James Harper, who recently donated his entire estate to St Mary's. Traditionally, Barnabas has been called 'son of consolation', i.e. someone who brings comfort in distress, but in view of this first recorded action, 'son of encouragement' seems more appropriate. Next comes Acts 9, verses 26-27: "When Paul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus." In Acts 11, as we heard earlier, the disciples "sent Barnabas to Antioch.....for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith". Finally, in Acts 13 we read that in Antioch there were prophets and teachers, of whom the foremost was Barnabas. It was made clear to the Christians there by the Holy Spirit that both Barnabas and Paul were to be "set apart for the work to which I have called them".

Maybe it is right that Barnabas should enjoy the epithet of both "Son of Consolation" and "Son of Encouragement". Here in this country there were 13 ancient church dedications to Barnabas, as well as in the meantime, countless others. Among recent dedications, though not of a church, is the Anglican College of St Barnabas in Surrey, which was founded in 1895 for the relief of retired priests and lay workers who had fallen on hard times and were unable to care for themselves. It has its own chapel, dedicated of course to St Barnabas, and in the meantime it provides full nursing care. If you are interested in learning more about it, or even in supporting it, please have a word with me afterwards.

Pausing from writing this sermon I was watching the livestream of a Thanksgiving service held last Saturday in the chapel at Epsom College, where I went to secondary school. The service was in memory of Emma Pattison, who had been Head of the school since last September, and of her daughter Lettie. At the beginning of February this year they were murdered by Emma's and Lettie's husband and father, who then shot himself. You may have read about it in the national news at the time. Tributes from their family, and from the educational establishments where Emma had served before coming to Epsom, and from Epsom College itself, all contributed to an incredibly moving occasion, which combined both tears and laughter. As I was watching, it occurred to me that the characteristics of Barnabas and of Jesus Christ were both present there: Son of Consolation and Son of Encouragement, in the company of the Son of Man himself.

