

Encouragement - St Barnabas' Day, June 2010

Job 29:11-16; Psalm 98; Acts 11:22-30, 13:1-3; Matthew 10:7-13

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by CS Lewis, the girl Lucy is addressed as 'daughter of Eve' by the faun she meets in the Land of Wardrobe. I think in this situation, 'daughter of Eve' simply means a human being who is female. Similarly, when in the Bible we read, for example, of 'one like a son of man', the basic meaning is 'human' or 'resembling a human'. Other times, though, such an expression isn't so neutral. Think, for example, of 'son of a bitch' meaning 'a worthless or contemptible person', or from the Bible, 'sons and daughters of iniquity', or 'son of a murderer'. But then Jesus refers to a 'son of peace'. When he's sending out the seventy, he says: 'Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace be to this house! And if a son of peace is there, your peace shall rest upon him, but if not, it shall return to you."' In more modern translations we're more likely to read: 'If a peace-loving person lives there... etc'.

Today we're celebrating St Barnabas, as his annual day in the church calendar fell on Friday. When we're introduced to him in the Book of Acts, we're told: 'There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement"'. If you were being remembered by such an expression in years to come, I wonder what would be said of you? Son of patience? Daughter of helpfulness? Or what?

I think it was about 25 years ago that Barnabas was chosen as the patron saint of this parish, and in view of what we know about Barnabas from the New Testament, it's a great name for a parish, a great aspiration for us to be sons and daughters of encouragement, and for this to be a community known as one which offers encouragement to all, as Barnabas did.

We first hear of Barnabas selling his property and giving the proceeds to the very early Church. He quickly became a leader. When Saul, later known as Paul, came to Jerusalem after his dramatic conversion, the disciples there were afraid of him, knowing he had previously been persecuting believers. It was Barnabas who was willing to support Paul, seeking him out, talking with him, and bringing him to see the other Christians, vouching for him that his new-found faith in the Lord Jesus was real.

When the good news of Jesus was spreading from Jerusalem, disciples in the Church in Jerusalem heard that in Antioch, the message was going not only to Jews, but to those who had no background among God's chosen people, and the Jerusalem church leaders were initially horrified, but wisely despatched Barnabas as a trusted delegate to Antioch to check out what was going on. We're told: When 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'. What a positive affirmation of this 'son of encouragement'. Continuing his encouraging ways, he again sought out Paul, who had retreated somewhat to his home town of Tarsus, brought him to Antioch, and worked with him in the fledgling church there for a whole year, teaching and bringing others to faith. Then, as we heard today in the reading from Acts, Barnabas and Saul, note Barnabas still being mentioned first at this stage, were, at the leading of the Holy Spirit, commissioned to go forth on what became the first, very successful missionary journey.

When Paul and Barnabas were about to set out on another such journey, Barnabas proposed to take along his young relative, Mark, who though he had started off with them on the first journey, hadn't lasted the distance. Paul vetoed that, saying Mark had shown himself undependable, but Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance, and so he and Mark went off on one

journey, while Paul took Silas and went on another. Apparently Mark responded well to the trust given to him by the 'son of encouragement', since we find that Paul later speaks of him as a valuable assistant.

I have on my bookshelf a book entitled *Encouragement*, with the sub-title, *The Key to Caring*¹. It was co-written by Larry Crabb, co-incidentally at about the time this parish was being named. Crabb is, or was, a well-known Christian teacher and counsellor. He points out that every Christian, regardless of gift or training, is called upon to encourage our brothers and sisters. Whatever the direction in which our particular congregation is moving, church life will include spending time in the presence of other Christians. And when we meet together as God's people, we are to encourage one another, to say and do things that stimulate others to a deeper appreciation of Christ and to stronger commitment to our relationship with Him and with each other.

The Book of Hebrews tells us to 'encourage one another'. In chapter 10, after reviewing the unique privileges that belong to us because of Christ's past work as sin-bearer and his present work as priest, the writer to the Hebrews urges us to think about three things. First, we are to approach God with a conscious awareness of our absolute acceptance in Christ. Second, because God is faithful, we are to cling tenaciously to the prospect of our eternal acceptance in heaven. Third, we are to give serious thought to how we can encourage one another.

I know that in this parish, there are many people and programs and opportunities geared to encouragement, and I don't plan today to make any specific suggestions, just to reinforce that both in this in-between time, and when we have a new start with a new rector, our commitment to

¹ *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* by Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr. and Dan B. Allender. S. John Bacon, Melbourne, 1985.

encouragement is and will be vital. Crabb tells one personal story of the potential life-changing effect of encouragement.

As a young man, he had the thoroughly annoying and humiliating problem of stuttering, and he tells of a particular time at high school when he had to say something at assembly, with disastrous results, after which he vowed that public speaking was not for him. He goes on to tell that a short time later, when at his church young people were encouraged to enter into the privilege of worship by standing and praying aloud, he felt pressure to do so, and in his nervousness got very confused in what he said, to the point of heresy. He writes: Stuttering throughout, I finally thought of the word *Amen* (perhaps the first evidence of the Spirit's leading), said it, and sat down. I recall staring at the floor, too embarrassed to look around, and solemnly vowing never again to pray or speak aloud in front of a group. Two strikes were enough.

Crabb continues:

When the service was over, I darted toward the door, not wishing to encounter an elder who might feel obliged to correct my twisted theology. But I was not quick enough. An older Christian man named Jim Dunbar intercepted me, put his arm on my shoulder, and cleared his throat to speak.”

I remember thinking to myself, “Here it comes. Oh well, just endure it and then get to the car.” I then listened to this godly gentleman speak words that I can repeat verbatim today, more than twenty years later.

“Larry,” he said, ‘there’s one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I’m behind you one thousand percent.’” Then he walked away.

Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being. My resolve never again to speak publicly weakened instantly.

Since the day those words were spoken, God has led me into a ministry in which I regularly address and pray before crowds of all sizes. I do it without stuttering. I love it. Not only death, but also life lies in the power of the tongue.

God intends that we be people who use words to encourage one another. A well-timed word has the power

- to urge a runner to finish the race,
- to rekindle hope when despair has set in,
- to spark a bit of warmth in an otherwise cold life, to trigger healthful self-evaluation in someone who doesn't think much about his shortcomings,
- to renew confidence when problems have the upper hand.²

And of course, it's not just words of encouragement that help.

- It's being there to offer support;
- it's an acknowledging glance to someone who has been helpful, or who has just done something that was clearly difficult for them;
- it's taking our turn at menial or tiring tasks without seeking acknowledgment;
- it's noticing the contribution of others, or when someone is struggling;
- it's following through on perhaps carelessly spoken words such as 'we must meet for coffee some time'.

² Pages 24, 25

It could be helpful for each of us today to take a little time to reflect on acts or words of encouragement that have made a difference to us in our walk with God, to give thanks to God and, if appropriate, to the person concerned, and to consider what more we can each do to become 'daughters and sons of encouragement'.

[Prayer of the Day]

Generous God,
whose Son Jesus Christ has taught us
that it is more blessed to give than to receive:
help us by the example of your apostle Barnabas,
a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith,
to be generous in our judgements
and unselfish in our service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. **Amen**