

One of the features of the worship of the Church of Ireland is our use of the liturgical year. There are the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Trinity. These seasons encourage us to focus on particular aspects of our faith story. At Christmas we focus on the Incarnation, the mystery of God made man in the person of Jesus; on Good Friday and Easter we focus on redemption; at Pentecost our attention turns to the activity of the Holy Spirit. And then, dotted among these, there are a number of days designated as Saints' Days when we remember with thanksgiving the work of particular individuals. I think of St Peter, St Paul, St Patrick. We have no tradition of intercession to the saints but they are honoured as sources of inspiration to us on our Christian pilgrimage.

Tomorrow is one such day in the Christian calendar when we honour the name of Barnabas. Barnabas, like Paul, was not one of the original apostles but, none the less, played an important part in the growth of the early Church. We first come across him in the Acts of the Apostles, as one of those who sold their possessions and brought the proceeds to the Apostles to distribute to those who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, was named Barnabas by the Apostles, a name meaning a son of encouragement. Encouragement was certainly one of the hall marks of his own discipleship. It was he who introduced Paul to the disciples in Jerusalem after his conversion on the Damascus Road. When word came that the Gospel was being preached to the Gentiles at Antioch, it was Barnabas who the disciples sent from Jerusalem to check on what was going on. We often refer to the missionary journeys of Paul, but at the outset it was Barnabas,

accompanied by Paul, who first embarked on these journeys though Paul quickly became the more prominent of the two. It was Paul and Barnabas who went to the Council in Jerusalem to defend the mission to the Gentiles in the face of those in the Church at Jerusalem who sought to undermine it. The split with Paul came when he insisted that his nephew Mark accompany them on their journeys. Paul refused and they went their separate ways. He is traditionally credited with the foundation of the Church in his native Cyprus and met his death at Salamis.

It is as Barnabas as encourager that I want to continue my thoughts this morning. The New Testament refers to the Church as the Body of Christ and so community lies at the heart of our understanding of ourselves. We are not just a group of individuals who happen to meet at a mutually convenient time. We are, in words of a colleague I have often quoted before, a ‘community of friends drawn together by the friendship of Jesus’. So within that understanding, encouragement is a vital element in our relationships with one another. So how does that work out in practice.

So let us go back to James the Levite from Cyprus and the name that the Apostles gave him, Barnabas, son of encouragement. ‘*uiJo;" paraklhvsew"*'. Now if we follow use of that word *paraklesi*" through the New Testament, and the different ways in which it is translated in our Bibles we begin to get a feel of what is meant to be an encourager of one another in the fellowship of the Church.

We come across it in that lovely passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians,

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, *Phil 2:1*

Our primary inspiration comes from our fellowship in faith with Christ himself. He is our model, our pattern for life in the world and with one another. He is the one who touched the leper when those around banished them from their villages, who healed the sick. So a large part of our encouragement of one another will be through our compassion for one another, bringing comfort and consolation to one another. It is in these terms that Paul writes to the Church at Corinth.

the God of all consolation, ⁴ who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. *2 Cor 1:3,4*

We who have known God's love and consolation in our own times of difficulty are called to show that same love and consolation to those around us.

Encouragement does not just take the form of sympathy. There is also the element of challenge to live up to our Christian profession. In the course of his journeys Paul and his companions became aware of a situation of great need in the Church in Jerusalem. Later on in this same second letter to the Church at Corinth he refers to the great generosity shown by other Churches in the matter of this collection. He challenges them, who pride themselves on the vitality of their faith, to show the fruits of that faith in their generosity.

³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly (lit with great encouragement) for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints

⁷ Now as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you--so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. *2 Cor 8:3,4,7*

So the Church honours the memory of James, the Levite from Cyprus, Barnabas, the ‘son of encouragement’. The one who opened doors, for Gentiles to join the Church, who encouraged the disciples to trust Saul of Tarsus, who stood by his nephew Mark in the face of what he saw as unjust treatment. As we honour his memory, let us as sons and daughters of encouragement, not only admire him but seek to emulate him in our own Christian pilgrimage, bringing comfort to those in need and by our own example calling others to more faithful service of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.