

Sunday 11 June 2023

St Barnabas the Apostle



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If you think about it, a good nickname says a lot. A good nickname manages to encapsulate every about a person and, if really clever, we hear the name and cannot thereafter see the recipient any other way. Jesus himself was a master at giving nicknames. Think of Peter ‘The rock’ or James and John who are ‘sons of thunder’.

I mention nicknames because our second reading tells us that in Antioch, while Barnabas was in the neighbourhood, the early believers were first collectively given their nickname of Christian—literally a ‘Christ-ian’. Being called a Christian in this way was the same as disciples of a modern political leader being

called, for example, a 'Thatcherite' or a 'Blairite'. It's identifying with that person. We discern that those early disciples so obviously followed Jesus that folk on the street thought they looked, sounded, and behaved like their leader. The nickname stuck because it fitted. You heard the nickname and it became a shorthand.

Today is St Barnabas' Day, but the day is actually named after a man called Joseph. Again, we discern a nickname. The 'bar' bit at the beginning straightforwardly means 'son'—in effect a very Jewish way of saying, 'the very essence of ...'. (Perhaps, today in our more inclusive age, we'd say 'child of ...' rather than 'son of ...') The Bible has many examples: we've already heard of the sons of thunder; Jesus regularly called himself 'son of man' and others called him 'Son of God'. A bar-mitzvah is a ceremony for a Hebrew boy. So when we think of 'Barnabas' we're saying 'son of ...' But what was son-ship relating to? The '-nabas' bit in the name 'Barnabas' is very exciting!

All the stories that have come down to us about Barnabas appear within the pages of the Acts of the Apostles. Its author, Luke, wrote of course in Greek. And, as he wrote, he chose a fairly common Greek word *parakleseos* (Παρακλήσεως). In all, *parakleseos* occurs 12 times in the New Testament and, according to context, it means a mix of three separate but clearly interrelated meanings.

Firstly, *parakleseos* means 'encouragement'. St Paul in Romans 15:4 uses the word in that way when it talks about 'the encouragement of the scriptures.' Romans 15.5 is written in similar vein, 'Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus.' So something of Barnabas' nickname means 'son of encouragement.

Secondly, *parakleseos* has the sense of 'exhortation', 'urging,' 'entreaty'. There's a sense of urgency and importance here. The New Testament uses the word in this sense fairly often. For example in Hebrews 12:5, the Bible speaks of 'the exhorting words that God spoke to us as His children'. The implied sense of this urging is always to bring about a positive change, urging with such an urgency, that its meaning is best translated as 'pleading'. A good example is St Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:4 'they urgently *pleaded* with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.' We see how something of Barnabas' nickname means 'son of entreaty, son of urging and persisting'.

And, thirdly, *parakleseos* means 'comfort'. The word is translated that way, for example, in 2 Corinthians 1:3, when it speaks of 'the God of all comfort'. Or again in 2 Corinthians 1:4, when St Paul speaks of the God who 'comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.' In each of these

verses *parakleseos* can only be translated sensibly as 'comfort.' So something of Barnabas' nickname means 'son of comfort'.

Today, as we remember St Barnabas, we are saying that this Joseph in the Acts of the Apostles was the son of encouragement, the son of comfort, the son of urging goodness. He the very embodiment of this way of being such that a well-chosen, appropriate nickname spliced them together, abbreviating all these lovely characteristics into a single, memorable phrase. It's his nickname, bar-nabas.

Taken together, though, these thoughts make me wonder: if we, collectively or individually, were given a nickname, what would we be called? Would any of us here be called 'Son (or daughter) of generosity' or 'Son of meanness'? Would people who know us call us 'son or daughter of thankfulness'; '... of love'; '... of joy'; maybe 'child of godliness'?

Today is St Barnabas Day, named after a man with a delightful nickname. But it was more than a chance nickname because it brilliantly summed up his whole character. He was so filled with God that these warm words automatically came to mind when people saw him,, 'Here comes the son of encouragement!' I think it's time that we decided what we would like people to call us when they see us approaching, a nickname based on our discipleship of the Lord Jesus. And, having decided, we need to actually live that way. What is your nickname going to be?