

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 19th September 2010

Acts 11:19-30 - "Encouragement"

Tonight we're going to think about the whole topic of encouragement. We all need encouragement – in horticultural terms it is what turns a spiritual seedling into a tree. It is like the sun coming up and turning a bud into what is was meant to become – a flower of great beauty. Or to go from Gardener's World to Top Gear, encouragement is like the oil in the engine of our spiritual lives.

There are 2 main ways that encouragement comes. First it comes directly from God as we hear or read his word. The second way is also from God but it comes via other Christians.

I was greatly encouraged 4 Sunday mornings ago when an old friend of mine from my college at university turned up at church. Christine was a 4th year in my first year and she was one of a number of people who were a great encouragement to me when I was converted at the end of my first term. I remember her sharing in my joy and saying how excited she was for me. She also gave me a Christian book that helped me understand the Bible a bit better as she did too when she saw me a month ago.

Christine has kept in touch over the years with the odd letter always reassuring me of her prayers. When I saw her last month I hadn't seen her for 6 or 7 years but it was very moving to hear how she'd kept praying for me every week since I was converted 14 years ago. She's a great encourager and we all need encouragement.

I'm not a 'hoarder' by any stretch but one thing I do keep hold of in a file is encouraging letters or emails that I've been sent – if I'm ever feeling a bit down it's a great help and encouragement to re-read them.

And so we come to our passage and to this wonderful character of Barnabas, surely one of the most attractive figures in Scripture. In our first reading from Acts 4 the disciples were sharing their possessions and then we read as a

particular example of this, v36: ***“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.”***

As someone who quite likes to call people by nicknames I’m glad that the Bible seems to be pro-nicknames with James & John called ‘Boanerges’ – the Sons of Thunder and now we have Barnabas – the Son of Encouragement. We hear a bit more about him in Acts 9 where we read what a help he was to Paul after he was converted.

So 9:26 ***“When he (that’s Paul) 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.”***

Then in our passage in Acts 11 we have this very special episode in which Barnabas is central. And as we look at it, it’s my hope that we’ll be inspired to grow in our encouraging. This congregation is full of encouragers but it’s something we can all develop and grow in.

We’re going to divide the passage into 3 parts. The main part is the 2nd part where we’ll look at Barnabas but it’s important too to see the context of his encouraging and the results of his encouraging.

So first we’re going to look at v19-21 to see the situation which he came into. And what we see in the **context** is that a new and exciting evangelistic work was being done by anonymous heroes.

Stephen had been martyred in chapter 7, there’d been a clamp down and whilst the leaders seem to have been ok the others were not and they had scattered. V19: ***“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 the Jews.”***

So they’d gone up the Mediterranean coast, across to Cyprus and then inland to Antioch. Antioch is in modern day Turkey – south Turkey – it’s not a big

place today but then it was a very significant place – it was the third city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria.

What do the disciples do when they get to this important city? Well we read v20: ***“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.”***

Something wonderful happens and a church is born that as we’ll see in the weeks to come is to have a great significance as the birthplace of foreign missions.

Antioch, end of v26, was the place where believers were first called ‘Christians’. And all this because these anonymous persecuted Christians had packed up their bags and as they headed out from Jerusalem they had packed the gospel with them.

Never underestimate what God can do through you as you mingle with and meet new people. Or what he can do through a period of suffering or some sort of upheaval in your life. These guys in Acts 11 had left behind their friends, their homes, their jobs but they trusted God and when people asked them, “So what’s brought you to Antioch?” they didn’t duck the opportunity but end of v20 they told them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

They probably had no idea of the significance of what they were doing but v21 ***“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”***

So that’s the context, then secondly we get to the **catalyst – Barnabas the Encourager**

V22 ***“News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.”*** Head Office hears news of a new outpost in Antioch – they want to know what’s going on and that it’s all ok and so Barnabas is sent to check it out.

In v24 there’s a lovely description of Barnabas. I think I’m right in saying that it is the only time in Luke’s 2 volumes that anyone is described as good. V24 ***“He***

was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith...” 2 great ingredients, the power of the Holy Spirit that he opened himself up to and faith which meant he looked beyond what he could see to what God was doing. These were the two foundations to his ministry of encouragement.

We’re going to look at 4 features of this ministry of encouragement.

The first thing we notice about Barnabas in his ministry of encouragement is that he was ready to put other people first. He’d learnt to be other-person centred. We saw that back in chapter 4 when he gave up part of his inheritance so that he could help poorer Christians. Then in our passage, it doesn’t seem that it was his initiative to come from Jerusalem – Head Office dispatched him – evidently there was a need and this great encourager responded to the need.

An encourager is someone who has learnt to put others first. Whereas a self-centred person is rarely free to help others because all their attention and focus is on themselves, an encourager has learnt to look beyond themselves to others and their needs.

A helpful test of how we’re doing in the area of encouragement is to reflect on what we think about when our minds are in neutral – when we’re free from immediate pressures are we mostly thinking about our bank balance, the pension fund, share prices, home improvement ideas, holidays, sport and so on or does our mind drift to other people and how we can help them. Barnabas was like that. His goodness that Luke highlights was evidenced in his other-person centeredness, his goodness towards others.

Secondly we see in one of the most beautiful phrases in the passage, Barnabas’ openness to see God’s grace in a young church. V23 ***“When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad...”***

These were young Christians with no apparent organisation – they hadn’t any leadership structures as far as we can tell but what we do know is that v21 ***“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”*** Inevitably though things there must have been a bit messy and now Jerusalem HQ have sent in Barnabas to check it out.

Now some people would have come into this situation of flux and inevitable mess and it would have been very different. They'd have been suspicious. They'd have looked for what was wrong, trying to suss out where the mistakes were being made – focussing in on all that needed correcting.

But Barnabas comes along and v23 ***“When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad...”*** Now I'm sure that it wasn't a perfect church by any stretch and that there were a whole load of things you could point to and say “Oh that's not right, and this needs some serious work” but not so with Barnabas.

To be an encourager you need to be ready to recognise what God has already done. An encourager builds on what God has started and then tries to help it along. An encourager is quick to see and rejoice in signs of the grace of God even if there are things that are not quite right.

It would be easy to come to any church service or mid-week meeting here or at other churches and we can find a dozen things to criticise in the first 5 minutes – I'm sure that Barnabas could have done that at Antioch; he could have come with his check-list and put a whole load of crosses on it to denote failure but instead when he ***“...saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad...”*** God had done a mighty work and Barnabas had the faith to see this. Like in Acts 9 when all the apostles were very suspicious of Paul but Barnabas could see the evidence of the grace of God.

When we look at other Christians are we like that or do we tend to be negative – these young people – they think they know everything and the silly shallow songs they like to sing.

Or these families and their obsession with their children, or these older people who want everything so traditional – we can all do it, you only have to press the right button and we're off on our particular hobby horse. Are we like that or do we see the grace of God – the life and vibrancy of the younger folk, the commitment of the families, the wisdom and solidity of the older people?

Do we see the grace of God and let it make us glad before we ever open our voices in criticism? Perhaps there's a Christian who's closer to you than you would like because you find them difficult; you're struggling with them

because there's something about them - perhaps their views on a certain topic or they just have a character trait that winds you up - well why not set yourself the challenge to go home and pray for them, think about the evidence of the grace of God in their life and be glad in that before you do anything else.

Barnabas models this brilliantly and the third thing we learn from him is his concern to help Christians persevere

This is where we come to the actual work of encouragement that he did in the second half of v23 where we read that he ***“encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”*** You see encouragement is more than saying, “I like your hair like that” or “You did a good job” – that’s important, the hair bit may not be important unless you’re married to someone who’s just had a new hairdo in which case it’s very important! Saying you did a good job is important and Christian encouragement includes that but Barnabas shows us something more deep, more connected to the ultimate goal of the Christian life.

He was concerned for these new Christians pastorally. He could see that God’s grace was at work in them but he wanted them to grow in that grace.

There are 2 aspects to it. He wanted them first of all to remain true to the Lord. How is it humanly speaking that genuine Christians remain true to the Lord? We remain true to the Lord by growing in his grace, by striving to put sin to death, by seeking to live a Spirit-filled, Spirit-pleasing life. We do this through the power of God in our own daily fight with temptation but what helps us is the support and encouragement of other Christians like Barnabas.

The other aspect of it is to remain true to the Lord with all our hearts. There’s great pastoral wisdom and experience there because when Christians go off the boil spiritually they tend not to do so in one mighty collapse – what’s much more common is for faith to decline very slowly and subtly.

People gradually become half-hearted and only go to home group once a month where before it was every week. They come to church but they give up going to the prayer meeting. When they come to church they have to lift themselves up to sing in a great effort. During the prayers their thoughts are

going in all directions. And the sermon well that is one serious bore to be endured only by some serious daydreaming.

We all need people to encourage us out of our half-heartedness. Not just to tick us off and wave a finger and be disapproving but we need others to spur us on and encourage us to really go for it spiritually and be wholehearted for the Lord.

If you're aware of your half-heartedness at the moment find a Christian you trust and be honest with them and tell them that you're struggling and that you need their help. I think that All Saints is full of encouragers; I think that we're good at encouraging one another but let's get even better.

It'd be great if we could develop a church culture where it was normal and expected not just to ask each other "how are you doing?" but "how are you doing spiritually, how are things going in your walk with the Lord?"

This was the kind of ministry Barnabas was exercising in Antioch – not simply "well done you did a good job" welcome though that is but the encouragement that says, "How can I pray for you?" or "please come and pray with me as I'm struggling with x or y".

The 4th thing we see is Barnabas' humble commitment to developing other people. Barnabas comes and does the work and 2nd half of v24 "**a great number of people were brought to the Lord.**" And he is humble enough to see that he needs help, it's far too much for him. So v25 "**Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.**"

This was a humble thing to do – he recognised his own limitations and so brought in someone else to help even though that person was as far as we can tell a far better teacher with a far stronger personality than Barnabas ever was. But from the start Barnabas has been keen to give Saul a break, from the start he's seen his potential and encouraging others into ministry is a real responsibility for any of us in any position of leadership role at all.

It's how we multiply ministry and ensure the job is done properly, it's how we train others to take over from us. Pause for a moment and think of the spiritual responsibility God has given you – it may be a formal position – leadership of a

group of some kind, it may be a role of influence among your peers in the youth group or at homegroup – who could you develop and encourage?

That was Barnabas – now very briefly let's see what **the effect** was. The result v27-30 was a church that was open to the Holy Spirit and responsive to human need. Some prophets come down from Jerusalem, one of them prophecies about a coming famine and they're open to what God was saying. Not only were they open to the Spirit they were also open to human need and were very generous.

They're told of how their brothers and sisters in Judea would be most effected by the food shortage and they have a whip round and each gives according to their ability. The effect of Barnabas' encouraging was that they too like him were other-person centred.

I hope it's been an encouragement for you to hear about Barnabas? The danger is always that we see these figures and we think, "Oh Barnabas – he's really challenging – I could never be like him." One writer calls Barnabas the "man with the biggest heart in the church" And that makes him seem like a one-off doesn't it? God made Barnabas but then he threw the mold away.

But let's remember his secret. V24 **"He was full of the Holy Spirit and faith."** It didn't come from within himself, he knew he needed help and the Holy Spirit provided that help for him and for all of us who look to the Spirit to strengthen us.

And he had faith – he didn't live with the limitations of sight. That's why he could go into the mess of that new church in Antioch and see the grace of God.

Let's think for a moment of the people who've encouraged us – the Barnabas' that have been there in our lives.

Someone years ago at university who got along side us – perhaps read the Bible with us.

A parent or grandparent who prayed with us, that friend who met up with us at that low point and strengthened us to persevere.

That other friend who rebuked us in love when we needed it and pointed us to live wholeheartedly for the Lord. A Christian teacher at school who invited us to a Bible study group.

Thank God for them and then ask God to show you who you can encourage - if there's anyone in particular you can get along side. Is there someone going through a tough time who you could encourage with a card or a phone call? Is there a young Christian who you could meet up with to read the Bible and pray with or to learn Bible verses with.

Think about who you could encourage to remain true to the Lord with all their heart – maybe it's someone very close to you – a spouse you could pray with, a child you could read the Bible with over the dinner table and encourage to sign up to a Christian summer venture in 2011. Maybe it's a friend at school or in the office you could give a Christian book to.

Ask God to show you who you could encourage, ask for the opportunity and pray that he would fill you with his Spirit and give you the faith you need to do it.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)