

Sermon for the Feats of St Barnabas 2015

“Behold what we are: May we become what we receive”

Last week, we explored a little more meaningfully what we are as people of God, and in so doing we began to understand more fully what it meant to be called blessed.

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of St Barnabas. Barnabas was certainly able to radiate blessedness. For Barnabas, as with all the early church apostles, their walk in faith was a long journey. Sometimes this journey was tough. They nearly all started from a different place, with different beliefs and often finding Christ, meant giving up significant areas of their lives.

Much of the evidence we have for the apostles of the early church is found in the New Testament; the Acts of the Apostles and the letters that follow. What we see there is a continual struggle to stand up against a prevailing culture that would ridicule or dismiss the spiritual benefits that Christ brings. But the apostles stand strong in the face of such opposition, because they recognise the bigger picture that, charity alone cannot save the world, only relationship with God can do that.

This I guess is the point Jesus is making when he points out to Judas that: “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me”.¹ It is not that we should ignore those who are less fortunate, but that the only way to truly alleviate an individual’s suffering is to help them find spiritual treasure and trust in God, whilst alleviating their practical needs – to help them recognise their blessedness. For the early church apostles, this was their central aim and they could not afford to hide their “light under a bushel”² or else the Church simply wouldn’t grow.

The other thing we notice as we look through the recordings of their endeavours, is that they didn’t always agree on how to go about this. In fact, often those who held greatest authority among them had to make decisions that some of the others did not like. Arguing and bickering featured, sometimes this fighting completely overshadowed their work and occasionally one or other would throw a tantrum and leave... Often they would return a short time later once they had recognised their rashness and the damage they had caused to the wider body and the Mission of God. This then is the story of normal humans walking a bumpy ride together towards recognising more fully their own blessedness. The reason they nearly always return to be in fellowship within the wider flock, is because they realise that this blessedness cannot be lived out in exclusion, no matter how much they disagree or become annoyed at each other.

Barnabas’ story, like so many of the early apostles, includes all these elements. Barnabas travelled, with his colleague St Paul, all over the known world to preach the good news and to grow God’s church. Alongside Paul, he was a workaholic in the business of God. St Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “are Barnabas and I the only two who are never allowed to stop working?”³ –no doubt by way of complaint at the lack-lustre nature of the Corinthian Christians.

It would appear that Barnabas grew in grace as he increasingly began recognising his blessed core more and more through the breaking of bread, healing the sick and preaching the Gospel of Christ. For

¹ Mt. 26:11; Mk.14:7; Jn. 12:8

² Mt. 5:15; Lk. 11:33

³ I Cor.9:5-6

Barnabas, the more he realised his blessedness, the more fruit he produced as a result. But, like us all, Barnabas too had his moments and at some point he and Paul split – only to be reunited some time later. It is thought that Barnabas was stoned to death in Salamis on a missionary trip to Cyprus and returned to the Lord in all rejoicing, having fulfilled his calling to proclaim the Good News to non-Christians... and doing so rather well.

I guess, for Barnabas, today's Gospel reading from St John is especially relevant. Having trusted in Christ all his life, never faltering in his balance of offering Charity alongside overt Christian witness and in the end he came to epitomise one significant verse of our reading; 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends'.⁴

Last week, we discussed how when you and I were baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we discovered the deepest truth about ourselves: that no matter what else, we are the Beloved of God.

We should radiate God's love, not in a naïve or sheepish way, but prominently and enthusiastically. With no personal agendas, no arrogance, no manipulation, but patient, kind, loving, accepting and above all else obedient to the people we truly are – a holy people, whose only agenda is the Lord Jesus Christ. But we are only human, and sometimes our humanity can get in the way...

As we explored last week, thankfully in the Eucharist we **behold what we are** and we ask that we **may become what we receive**.

In broken bread and wine outpoured we glimpse Christ's broken body on the cross and see the lengths to which God is willing to go for each and every one of us – an intimate love beyond measure. Every time we receive the Eucharist, we are transformed -- or should be transformed -- a little more fully into the Body of Christ. "**Behold what we are: May we become what we receive.**"

As we explored this further last week, we drew on the work of the formidable spiritual teacher Henri Nouwen as he began to explore what the life of a Christian entailed. For him, the words "taken," "blessed," "broken," and "given" summarize the life of every Christian, in fact, he considered that they summarize our lives as compete human beings.⁵ But especially as Christians, we are called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken, blessed, broken, and given.

We discovered how to be "taken" meant to be chosen, to be precious to God who implanted his image in each and every one of us at our creation. If we explore what that image might look like through the example of Christ, we see an image of love. Not just superficial love, but love that is willing to make the tough choices for the wider good, even if that leads to immense struggle.

Then we explored what it was to be called blessed; Nouwen's second characterization. First, we must recognise the fact that we are "blessed," and to remember that "blessing" literally means to speak well of someone. We are blessed, for God is always speaking a word of blessing in our hearts. When we train ourselves to hear God's blessing better, we can't help but speak good things to other people and call forth

⁴ Jn. 15:13

⁵ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992

their beauty and truth. As Henri says, “No one is brought to life through curses, gossip, accusations, or blaming.”

We are chosen and blessed. And we are broken, too. Everyone in this room is broken. We all have places of loneliness or fear, places of disappointment, shame, hurt or grief. We all have feelings of betrayal and we have all been the betrayer – both leave their scars. Sometimes we sadly project that brokenness onto others and onto God or his representatives; especially sometimes onto God and his representatives. We all know the pain of broken relationships, and we all face fear of death, often producing the most destructive display of brokenness. We need to learn to accept and befriend our brokenness, before it destroys us. We only do this by entrusting our whole selves to the care of God, so that, as St. Paul puts it, we know that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's”.⁶ This is true self-knowledge and only comes from confronting the parts of our lives that are broken, especially the most painful stuff. Doing so takes real honesty and real bravery.

It is important to place our brokenness in the light of God's blessing, to experience it within the context of God's love. This can be especially difficult if our brokenness includes an element of unbelief or anger towards God. But it is essential that we overcome such destructive notions in order to help it to heal in the only true healing presence open to us – God's love as received through Jesus. When we know ourselves as God's Beloved, we experience our suffering differently -- maybe as a kind of purification, or as a way to enter a deeper communion with a loving God who, in Jesus Christ, allowed himself to be broken.

And finally, we are chosen, blessed, and broken -- to be given. Henri writes “Our greatest fulfilment lies in giving ourselves to others.” Our humanity comes to its fullest bloom in giving, not because of individual fulfilment, but because of the power it has to unite and grow communion with one another. We become beautiful people when we give whatever we can give and share whatever we can share: a smile, a handshake, a kiss, an embrace, an apology, a word of love, a donation, a present, a prayer, the Eucharist, a part of our life... When Jesus says, ‘those who save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’,⁷ this is what he means. How different our lives become when we believe that every little act of faithfulness, every gesture of love, every word of forgiveness, every prayer for peace or healing or reconciliation, every gift for the good of someone else, every little bit of joy and peace will multiply and multiply as long as there are people to receive it, until heaven breaks through and the earth is completely healed from the sins that separate us.

The witness of Barnabas shows us that this is never an easy road, it has its ups and downs. Sometimes, just like Barnabas, we might even lose a friend or a colleague along the way. But the building of God's kingdom requires us to not only believe we are blessed, but to confidently live so that others can see it and see where it comes from - to help the rest of the world recognise that at the core of our blessedness sits our loving God.

Once again, we behold what we are. May we become what we receive.⁸

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⁶ Romans 14:8

⁷ The Gospels of: Matthew 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24

⁸ This sermon is based largely on text written by Society of St. John the Evangelist & *Margaret Bullitt-Jonas*