

Today on this feast of St. Barnabas, we continue to ponder, in the special days after Whitsunday/Pentecost and Trinity Sunday the difference the Holy Spirit makes in Christian life. One of the seven manifestations of the Holy Spirit's presence is the gift of courage, the strength that comes from God in ordinary and extraordinary circumstances to do the right thing despite fears, tiredness or other obstacles.

Today we celebrate perhaps the greatest witness of this type of fruit of the Holy Spirit in St. Barnabas. He is one of the most important figures in the history of the early Church and, I think, among the least appreciated. Early in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke tells us that his real name was Joseph, but the apostles nicknamed him Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement." Why did they give him that title? It could have been because he had sold a field he owned and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet, an obvious sign of his total commitment to Christ and total trust in the apostles Christ had chosen to lead the early Church. Such a gesture, common among the first disciples, would have certainly inspired the other members of the burgeoning Church courageously to do the same. But the nickname was an excellent summary of his entire personality, for he was someone who gave others courage, who believed in them, who filled them to respond to God with enthusiasm. In today's first reading, St. Luke tells us that when he arrived in Antioch, "he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart."

We see his encouragement especially in his support of St Paul. Without Barnabas' intervention, Paul likely would have remained, lived and died a tent-maker in Tarsus. Instead, because of Barnabas' courageous and encouraging interventions, Paul was able to become the greatest missionary in the history of the Church. It was Barnabas who was the catalyst for bringing Paul out of obscurity, making him his collaborator, vouching for him with the leaders and members of the Church who didn't trust him because of his murderous past, and launching him on the trajectory that led to his founding so many Churches across the ancient world. Because of Barnabas' action, encouragement, and personal recommendation, the Church of Jerusalem welcomed Paul.

Barnabas knew Paul was ready. And so he encouraged him to leave his tent-making behind and come with him to make temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul agreed. And they headed to Antioch where "for a whole year they met with the Church and taught a large number of people," forming them in the love of the Lord in such a way that it the disciples for the first time were called "little Christs," or "Christians." It was after that year's worth of hard work tilling the soil of souls in Syria that the Holy Spirit spoke and asked for Barnabas and Saul to be set apart for the work to which he was calling them. And that's when the two of them began the first of the great missionary journeys in Church history, implanting the Gospel across Asia Minor. The rest is, in a sense, history.

Little did Barnabas know that when he put his own reputation on the line for Paul before the Apostles in Jerusalem, when he went to Tarsus to ask for help, what the Holy Spirit would later do. All he did was encourage and invite. The Lord did the rest.

There's a great lesson for all of us here. The Church today needs many more Barnabases, men and women who aren't afraid to encourage others to share their work, to stick up for others when others don't think they're capable or qualified, to invite them to collaborate in the joyful duty of passing on the Good News to others.

In an age of so much depression and sadness, we need Barnabases who can inspire with Christian hope. In an age in which people are haunted by the mistakes and sins of the past, we need Barnabases who can point out that they've changed and that we should not waste, out of fear, the talents God has given. At a time when so many have wandered away from the Church, we need Barnabases who can encourage them to come home and to use the gifts God has given them for the building up of his kingdom. Just as in ancient Antioch, so today, there aren't enough labourers in the Lord's vineyard to attend to the ripe fruit on the vine. There are so many sheep in the Lord's fold who need good shepherds to care for them, not to mention so many sheep who have wandered from the fold who need those acting in the person of the Good Shepherd to leave the 99 behind and go out in search for them. It's something that Archbishop Philip can't do all by himself. It's something that the bishops united with him can't do by themselves. It's something that all the priests of the world can't do together. It's something that all the missionaries, religious, and consecrated people can't do. It's something for which even all the catechists together with clergy and religious can't do. It's something for which we're all needed. Today Barnabas, that "good man filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith," on behalf of God comes to us as he did to Saul in Tarsus to encourage us to get involved.

Let's ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with his gift of courage so that we may respond as wholeheartedly as Paul and Barnabas did, to be "little Christs" so that with others we might fulfil the mission for which the Spirit has set us apart to accomplish in God's name. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton