

BARNABAS

I wonder if you have ever reflected on the people and the events who have made us who we are.

True, all of us have inherited traits and dispositions from our parents and families, but people and events mark and mould us as well – those who have believed in us, those who have encouraged us, those who have been loyal friends – such people build us up and have positive effects. Those of us who are ordained - as for Nathan - we will have been encouraged along the way by a variety of people that God was truly calling us to ministry.

The opposite can be said for those who let us down, who purposely set out to do us harm, to put us down, who take advantage of our vulnerable times who use us for their own advantage – or amusement. These leave negative effects.

And we have all encountered and experienced both types – the positive and the negative, the helpful and the harmful, those who build us up and those who break us down.

Tomorrow is St. Barnabas' Day, and Barnabas embodies so many of the characteristics that hold people up, that help them flourish, that help them realise their potential. Such an important part of ordained ministry is to build up the people of God to truly be disciples.

And nowhere is this seen better than in regard to Mark, the writer of the first Gospel, and, as it happens, Barnabas' nephew.

Mark was a young man at the time of Jesus' ministry, too young to be called a disciple. But it is generally supposed that Mark's parent's house was a meeting place for Jesus and the disciples – the room where the Last Supper was held; the room where Jesus met with the disciples after the Resurrection; the room where they met on the Day of Pentecost. Mark's credentials couldn't be better.

And when Paul, who owed so much to Barnabas for his acceptance in the early church – it was Barnabas who stood up for Paul when the rest of the disciples were, rightly, suspicious of Paul's conversion. When Paul and Barnabas were going to bring the Gospel northwards and westwards from Palestine, Barnabas wanted to bring Mark with them. He saw Mark's potential as a future leader in the church.

But it was all too much for Mark. Once they left familiar shores Mark got cold feet and wanted to return home.

To the single-minded, black and white Paul, Mark was a loser, a failure and no good.

Paul and Barnabas fell out over the matter and Barnabas returned home with Mark while Paul forged on ahead.

The name Barnabas means 'Son of Encouragement', and how easily Mark's gifts and contribution could have been lost to the church if it had not been for Barnabas who stood by him and encouraged him to get over what must have been a bruising and very negative experience.

But Mark remained in the church, and was central to its life and ministry. He became the companion of Peter, and thankfully, years later, was reconciled to Paul when the latter was in prison in Rome. And when Peter and Paul were killed by the Emperor Nero, it was Mark who compiled the first Gospel, a document which was later used by Matthew and Luke as the basis for their Gospels.

Fortunate are those who have a Barnabas' in their lives, for encouragement achieves far more than rejection, belief in people far more than harsh criticism.

You will hear much more about our trip to Uganda but I believe the core of our trip was to be encouragers to those who often feel the world has ignored them. For all those who have been ordained priest this weekend – not only are they called to be encouragers but it is the responsibility of all of us to encourage them as they have responded to this particular call to ministry. A call that brings many demands as well as much enjoyment. A call that sees people at their worst and at their best. A call that celebrates with others at times of joy but also walks with those who are bereaved and experiencing crisis. A life that Nathan has experienced over this last year as a Deacon but now enters that most special of experiences when he celebrates the Eucharist and in that moment brings people so very close to God.

We first meet Barnabas in Acts 4. He was not one of the 12 disciples. A native of Cyprus he had become a Christian during a visit to Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost. A good and faithful man who contributed generously to the needs of the early church. But it was not just his money but his encouragement of others which has marked him out as a special person and for which he is rightly celebrated with a special day.

Not only do we all need a Barnabas in our lives, but we each should try to emulate his example by being people of encouragement to others. Who knows where such encouragement may lead!