

St Barnabas Sermon | 1 June 2023 **What might it mean to be a friend of Christ?**

*We read John 15.12-17 together from the screen. Jesus is talking to his disciples – that's us.*

There are 2 main ways of describing our identity as Christians. The first is the one we refer to in baptism when we say that the one being baptised has adopted Christ's identity as God's beloved son or daughter. As we participate symbolically in Christ's death and resurrection, traditionally by going under the water of baptism and then surfacing above it, we have a fresh identity as God's daughter or son. We become brothers and sisters of Christ, if you like, and with one another. We are part of a new family. That's one identity.

A second identity is the one I want to focus on this morning, which is that of being a friend of Jesus. Friends are people we choose, whereas siblings and other family members are a given whether we like them or not. So, our church sisters and brothers, our siblings are a given. We didn't choose them.

In the gospel passage we have just read together, Jesus calls us his friends and says that he has chosen us, *chosen us*, as his friends - just take a moment to absorb that; Christ has chosen you as his friend. The initiative comes from him. Have you ever had the experience, as I have had, of really wanting to meet up with a friend, but it seeming as though I usually have to make the first move, and how affirming it is when the friend takes the initiative instead? Jesus takes the initiative. That also helps those of us who perhaps feel we could never approach Jesus as though he was our friend because he is way out of our league. We can relax. He approaches us. And, as his friends, he appoints us to go out and bear fruit. So, what might it mean to be a friend of Jesus?

I want us to consider that in the light of the life of St Barnabas whose day we celebrate today. There's quite a lot about Barnabas in the book of Acts and before the events we heard about today, Barnabas, or Joseph as he was first called, Joseph the Levite, was the one who sold some land and gave the proceeds to the apostles (Acts 4.37). It was the apostles who gave him the new name of Barnabas which means son of encouragement. His response to hearing the gospel was to be generous with his possessions.

The gospel as described by Luke in the book of Acts is about Christ's resurrection and the offer of forgiveness, expressed with great power through the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus' friends, the disciples. It was on hearing this gospel that Barnabas responded with generosity. If you have ever had the experience of being forgiven for something you have done wrong you may understand Barnabas' response. For some of us the most powerful examples of that may have happened when we were children if we were fortunate enough to have parents who not only told us off, but also forgave us. He was fully accepted by these followers of Jesus – a wonderful thing to experience. He received Jesus' friendship and then that of the apostles.

His generosity, though, was not just about his material possessions, but about his way of relating to others. That's what we see in today's reading. His own experience of being welcomed and accepted, of being offered friendship, was something he then passed on to Saul, later Paul. Saul's conversion was viewed with some scepticism by the early church, but Barnabas reached out to him, travelling all the way from Antioch to Tarsus, taking the risk of inviting Paul to join him in the mission to the gentiles. He was generous, and also discerning – he could see where Paul's gifts lay and was willing to trust that insight.

So friendship with Jesus triggers generosity and fruitfulness - at Antioch many people turned to Christ as a result of Barnabas' and Paul's stay there. Barnabas had passed on his friendship with Jesus to Paul who then, like him, went on to bear much fruit.

A tiny example of how when we receive generosity we may find ourselves passing it on is one I experience when driving. If I pause to allow another car to come from a side road in front of me I notice how almost always that driver will then do the same for another car ahead of them!

This all sounds quite straightforward, except that we live in times that seem to struggle with being generous in our forgiving and welcoming. I wonder how many people are befriending Philip Schofield or John Sentamu at present? In the current climate we are quick to tear down and humiliate public figures who fail us, who don't live up to our ideal. Paradoxically this can make it harder for someone to acknowledge that they have done something wrong, fearing the consequences and going for a lie or a cover up instead. Including forgiveness in your world view is potentially liberating. We Christians know about it. Part of our calling is to let others know about it. To pass it on. You may remember Jesus after the resurrection, saying to his friends 'If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain them they are retained.' Holding out the possibility of forgiveness as Christianity claims is at the precious centre of our faith.

Saul, as he then was, would not have seen stoning Stephen as wrong. It was only after his encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road and then with believers like Barnabas that he would have recognised his part in Stephen's execution as sinful. After all, he could have said, 'Well, it wasn't me who actually stoned him. It wasn't me who killed him. I only looked after the coats of those who did.'

In our gospel today Jesus says to his disciples that he calls them his friends because everything he learned from his Father he made known to them. We might imagine Barnabas sharing that learning in his conversations with Paul, and Paul grasping more fully what he had done and entering more fully into the offer of forgiveness and what that had cost Jesus. We can read some of the fruit of that in Paul's letters.

Luke describes Barnabas as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. This didn't mean he was a pushover. He was sent by the apostles in Jerusalem to Antioch basically to do what we might call an archdeacon's inspection; you know, when the archdeacon checks our registers and the inventory of our valuables and asks searching questions about what our church has been doing. Were these gentile converts genuine believers? Was it ok that they weren't Jewish? Someone with integrity and discernment like Barnabas was needed to find out. He would have observed and asked pertinent questions. We can imagine him doing the same when he went looking for Saul.

Good friends aren't pushovers. They sometimes challenge us. We may have disagreements, as Paul and Barnabas did later over John Mark when they parted company for a while. I sometimes wonder if that parting was also about Barnabas letting Paul develop his own mission. Good friends allow space for one another.

So, friendship with Jesus can mean accepting his welcome, his forgiveness, his offer of new life and then passing it on. Doing so with generosity, which may be about how we use our possessions, or how we relate to others, especially perhaps to those who may be marginalised in some way. It might mean challenging one another as together we try to walk as friends of Jesus.

At the start of this week when Reading holds its climate festival, I'd like to suggest that we might extend our friendship with Jesus to the earth. We talk about saving the planet, or tackling climate change. That can sound very daunting. Suppose we also or instead see ourselves as offering friendship to our planet earth as well as its human inhabitants? We have benefitted hugely from earth's generosity; indeed, we couldn't survive without it. Suppose we responded generously by extracting less and putting back more? Suppose we asked for forgiveness?

Jesus said, 'I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from the Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give it to you'. John 15.15-16