Barnabas and the Gift of Encouragement

When Dorris Kearns Goodwin wrote her Pullitzer Prize-winning book on Abraham Lincoln, she called it 'Team of Rivals' because Lincoln knew that if he was to abolish slavery and win the civil war he could never achieve it alone; he needed a cabinet of the best people he could get, including three men who had opposed him in the election.

The apostle Paul had an even greater world changing vision. And like Lincoln he had a team. Except his wasn't a team of rivals. Sure, there was conflict. But they weren't competing against one another. Paul's team was united in this vision of seeing the good news of Jesus spread across the world.

So, over the summer, we're going to look at that team. We're going to look at Mark, and how you can recover from failure. At Priscilla and Aquilla, and how you can serve God where you are. At Timothy, and how you can develop as a leader; at Eunice and Lois and the power of parents and mentors; at Titus, and learning to lead through difficulty; at Apollos, and how life in general, and Christian ministry in particular, is about Christ, not you; and finally at Demas, and how what you love most matters most.

But we're going to start by looking at a guy who wasn't just another member of Paul's team, he was the first to spot Paul's potential in the first place, and took Paul under his wing. And that's Barnabas. And we're going to look at him, and the gift of encouragement.

Before we do, I'll let you into a secret. When Su was pregnant for the first time we decided that if it was a boy, we'd call him Barnabas - because I think this man is awesome. And Naomi was born. So the second time we decided, if this is a boy he's going to be Barnabas. And Lydia was born. So the third time we decided that if this was a boy he was definitely going to be Barnabas. And Hannah was born.

Now, everyone else in our families thought Barnabas was a terrible name, and we began to think maybe the Lord did too, and that unless we changed the named he'd never give us a son. So we decided that if number 4 was a boy we'd call him Jonathan Joshua Jeremy Barnabas Slack - hoping the Lord wouldn't notice we'd snuck Barnabas in at the end. And Katie was born. And we gave up.

So, let's look at Barnabas and what he has to teach us about encouragement.

Turn to Acts 4:32. The church in Jerusalem is in its infancy and this is the first time Acts that we meet Barnabas.

Reading: Acts 4:32-5:2

1. An Encourager Encourages in Word and Deed

So Luke tells us that Joseph was a Levite, from the tribe of Levi. And Levites were set apart to teach the people the Bible. And from what follows in Acts, it's pretty clear that Barnabas was a Bible teacher. Except he's different from the kind of Bible teacher who's always down on people. We're not told when he got converted, but look what Luke tells us in v36: Joseph 'was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement).'

Now, I don't know if you had a nickname at school, but mine was 'Fatty'. Then at work it was 'Slack by Name, Slack by Nature.' But with Barnabas what stood out to the apostles wasn't his weight, or his

work ethic. It wasn't the size of his nose, or his ability to hold alcohol. It was that he went round encouraging people.

Now, imagine your name coming up in conversation and someone says, 'she is such an encourager' and someone else goes, 'you are so right!' And someone else joins in and says, 'Just the other day I was feeling miserable and he or she came along and after a few minutes of being with him or her the cloud had lifted.' Wouldn't that be a great reputation to have? Well, that was Barnabas.

And it's the apostles, the leaders, who nickname him that: 'son of encouragement.' And maybe that's because they've been on the receiving end of it. You see, if you read Acts you'll see that the apostles are already facing threats from the authorities for preaching about Jesus, so maybe Barnabas has been coming alongside them, saying, 'guys, keep going, don't give in to fear, God's with you, this is his work, you're doing great.'

In the film *Darkest Hour*, there's this touching moment when Churchill is sat alone in a dark room, and he is full of doubts and fears. Parliament is in panic; support for him in Cabinet has collapsed and people are plotting against him. And Churchill's ready to give up. And then the king walks in, and sits down next to him and says quietly, 'You have my support.' And Churchill can't believe it, because he knows the king never wanted him as Prime Minister. So the king repeats it, 'you have my support.' And knowing the king stood by him gave him the courage to stay in the fight.

There are times when leaders need that kind of encouragement. And when the apostles needed it Barnabas came alongside and told them, you have the king's support.

When the Amalekites attacked Israel in the desert Moses stood on the top of a hill, with his staff in his hand. And all the time he kept his arms raised, Israel was winning the battle, but as soon as he lowered his arms, Amalek would gain the upper hand. So, let me ask you, how long can you keep your arms in the air for? Holding a staff? And Moses was getting old. So what did the men around him do as his arms began to sag, and people were losing their lives down on the battle field? Did they start criticising him for his weakness and failure? No, Aaron and Hur came alongside him and lifted his arms for him.

And when Moses handed the leadership of Israel over to Joshua, what do you think he told the people? 'Israel, make sure you point out to Joshua everything he does wrong, 'cos that'll keep him humble'? No! He says, Deuteronomy 1:38, 'Encourage him.'

So, church, thank you for all the times you encourage me; or my family; or Rhys, or the elders. And whatever church you find yourself in in the future, don't stop: make the decision to be a Barnabas kind of person who deliberately encourages your leaders.

And youth, as you become church members for yourselves, here or elsewhere, be a Barnabas: an encourager, not a critic, of your leaders. And think about your parents - because there's a sense in which they're your leaders, aren't they. Now, you might hear that and think - 'encourage my parents? But they're so… imperfect!' I know, and strangely enough they know that too. But an encourager doesn't pretend everything's perfect. A Barnabas type person doesn't see perfection, they see a future filled with hope; they see by faith what God can do in someone's life - because they know God is good, and God is for us. So, without getting too soppy, think, how can I encourage my parents and my leaders?

But it's not just leaders who need encouraging, is it? We all do. In Eph 6:22 Paul tells the church he's sending Tychicus to them, 'for this very purpose… that he may encourage your hearts.' You see, Paul knows that it's not just leaders whose arms flag. And there's an event in Judah's history that tells us why we can all become discouraged at times.

Jerusalem was surrounded by the army of Assyria, and every other city the Assyrians had ever besieged had fallen with devastating results. So for the citizens of Jerusalem things look terrible and they know it. So what does King Hezekiah do? He gathers them together and 2 Chron 32 tells us, 'He… spoke encouragingly to them, saying, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him, for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles." And the people took confidence.' (v6-8)

Remember in the Lord of the Rings how the Orcs mass outside Helms Deep, ready to take it? Well, if you were in Jerusalem and had looked over the city walls onto the Assyrians below you would have felt how the people in Helms Deep felt. And fear was rising and hope was falling - because they knew that the forces against them were way greater than their own. They knew they stood no chance.

And when you, or someone you love, your friend, or husband or wife, or child gets discouraged, it's because they're facing something that seems too big, too bad, or too difficult for them to handle. And hope of things being different is dying. And when that happens we need someone like Hezekiah, an encourager, to remind us, 'yes this is the enemy, the problem you face, but our God is far greater and far kinder, and your future is in his hands.'

You see, an encourager like Barnabas, or Hezekiah, isn't a fantasist. They don't pretend things aren't bad, or there isn't an enemy outside the gates. They know this problem is very real. It's just that they also know that God never loses a battle and he's the one who fights for you. And sometimes we need each other to help us remember that.

But one of the extraordinary things about Barnabas is that he didn't just encourage with words. Look at Acts 4:37 again, Barnabas 'sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet.' But then Luke adds, chapter 5:1, '*But a man named Ananias*…' lied about how much he'd given.

So, why did Ananias lie about his giving? Because he wanted to look good. To look more generous than he really was. He wanted to use his resources to get kudos from others. *But,* Luke says, Barnabas was different. He was the real deal. Now, does anyone know what a stick of rock is? It's hard and sweet and sticky and sold at British seaside resorts. And typically it has a word written all the way through. Break that stick anywhere along its length and you can read the word. And that was Barnabas. Encouragement was written all the way through him, even down to his bank account. And he even used his financial resources to encourage and prosper God's work. So, maybe think, how could I use the resources God has given me like Barnabas used his?

2. An Encourager Comes Close When Others Keep Their Distance

Look at Acts 9:26-27. Luke is talking about Paul after his conversion, 'And when he [Paul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles.'

So, Barnabas gave sacrificially, *but* Ananias didn't. Others withdrew from Paul *but* Barnabas welcomed him. It's the 'But' of Barnabas, isn't it. The way an encourager sees and lives differently. And where others are afraid, for their safety, or about what others will think of them, an encourager steps in. Others saw Paul's past, *but Barnabas* saw Jesus at work in Paul's life: 'So if Jesus has welcomed Paul, let me step over there and put my arm round his shoulder.'

I recently read an article by the wife of a pastor who had been fired for moral failure. The thing she said that hurt the most in the months that followed was that people who she thought were friends dropped her like a hot potato. At the moment she needed encouragers to remind her 'there is a future' and what she experienced was people heading for the exits. Thankfully, she said, new friends stepped in.

You see, an encourager doesn't criticise from, or withdraw to the sidelines, they draw close to the mess in love, because by faith they can see Jesus has a better future. So, think, how could I befriend the person on the edge - maybe at school. Of, if you know a friend feels isolated or discouraged at school, or on campus, or at work how could you regularly let them know - maybe by texting them - that you love them and are praying for them?

3. An Encourager is Happy Not to be the Centre

Look at Acts 11:22-26. In Antioch, loads of Gentiles were becoming Christians, and Luke says 'The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith… So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul [that's Paul], and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.'

So there's a great move of God going on in Antioch, and Barnabas sees it. But how does he respond? 'What a great platform for my ministry!'? 'Let me muscle in here! Let the spotlight fall on me!'? No! He encourages those whom God is already using, and he heads off to find Paul, because he thinks 'this could be a great training ground for Paul.'

Life isn't about you or me being in the spotlight, is it? It's about Christ. Barnabas knew that. Encouragers know that - and it frees us to encourage others to out-succeed us.

You see an encourager doesn't resent, they love to see the next generation step on the stage. It's why watching Linley with the youth band is so awesome, isn't it? It's why the apostles back in Jerusalem called Barnabas, 'Our beloved Barnabas' (Acts 15:25). So, oldies, think, how can you personally encourage our youth, our students, our young leaders? And just think how your own soul will grow as you do.

4. An Encourager Tries Again

We're going to look at this in more detail next week, but Paul and Barnabas take young John Mark on a mission trip, and Mark blows it. So, when the next trip comes around, Mark does't feature anywhere on Paul's team sheet. But Barnabas… Acts 15:37, 'Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark… and there arose a sharp disagreement, so… Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.'

Now, both Barnabas and Paul have had their fingers burnt with Mark. And Paul needs a team he can depend on. But where Paul sees a risk, Barnabas sees an opportunity for redemption. And he gives up his platform with Paul to see this young failure restored, because an encourager sees a life trashed by

bad choices and knows, ‘Jesus has better plans than the rubbish dump’, and tries again. So, is there anyone in your life who has fallen in sin… again, who needs the second, third, fourth chance that only Jesus can give?

5. An Encourager (still) Cares about Truth

The danger of hearing all this stuff about encouragement is that you begin to think that life must be about giving everyone lots of hugs and the warm fuzzies, and, to use that horrible expression, loving on everyone. All of which, if you’re English, sounds more like *the other place* than heaven. And that what someone actually believes, or how they live, doesn’t matter - we just need to encourage them and help them feel better about themselves. But that wasn’t Barnabas.

Look at Acts 15:1-2, ‘Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised… you cannot be saved.” And… Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them.’ In other words, Barnabas didn’t encourage false teachers. He didn’t encourage those who spread division. He showed them the door. He was prepared to contend for the truth.

Listen to what Hebrews 3:13 says: ‘Exhort [or encourage] one another every day… that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.’ So, a true encourager knows that there is such a thing as sin, and that sin can be deceitful, and that it hardens hearts. So true encouragement isn’t, ‘I’ll encourage you whatever path you choose.’ It’s an encouragement that flows from knowing we’re saved by grace, and that grace leads us to live a life pleasing to God. So, ponder, are there areas where, in your desire to encourage, you have compromised truth or forgotten there is such a thing as sin?

Which leads us to…

6. An Encourager Will Make Mistakes

The church in Galatia had been infiltrated by people telling the new Gentile believers that Jesus wasn’t enough, they needed to be circumcised if they were to really count as God’s people and be saved. And, as a result, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. But then look what Paul says in Gal 2:13, ‘And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with [Peter], so that *even Barnabas* was led astray by their hypocrisy.’ Even Barnabas!

It’s a reminder, isn’t it, as wonderful and kind and loving as Barnabas was, he wasn’t Jesus. And neither are we. And if you’re someone who likes to encourage others, your weak spot may just be that you want people to like you - you like to affirm others and you want them to do the same to you. And that leaves you open to peer pressure.

So, if we want to grow in encouragement, how can we do that whilst staying rooted in truth?

The God of Encouragement.

Look at Romans 15:4-6, ‘Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

God is the God of encouragement, Paul says. It's in his very nature to encourage - because more than anyone else he knows his purposes are good and his power is absolute. So what possible reasons are there to despair? And he speaks his encouragement to us, Paul says, through the Bible.

I mean think: where did Barnabas - the Bible teaching Levite learn encouragement? Here, in the word. And how could Hezekiah encourage in the face of overwhelming odds? Because he knew, for himself, the majesty, power and faithfulness of God.

So, if you want to be an encourager of others, number 1, daily strengthen yourself, encourage yourself in God, in the Scriptures.

Number 2, encourage yourself in the gospel. The good news of Jesus tells us that in our failure, Christ drew close. It tells us that he became poor to make us rich. It tells us that he gave up his life so that we might have life. It tells us he rose again that we might have a future. That he who began a good work in us will complete it.

I know you probably make your own, but for our BBQs we buy Aldi chicken in Indonesian sauce. It's delicious. So, like a piece of chicken marinading in a sauce, soak yourself in all that Jesus has done for you. In his love for you, in his giving up glory for you, in his speaking a better future over you than the rubbish dump; in his welcoming you and forgiving you, and giving everything up for you, and you'll have a deep well of encouragement for others.

Number 3, Meet Together. Look at Hebrews 10:25: 'Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.' Now, if you're an introvert you probably get your refreshment by getting alone, not by being in a crowd. The danger comes when you want to stay there. And Hebrews says don't - because others need you. As Sim once said, there is such a thing as the ministry of turning up.

One of the things I like to do to relax is paint. The problem is, I'm bad at it. And I'm particularly bad at painting trees… and skies… and mountains… and people. So what do you do when you're bad at something? Maybe you quit. Or maybe you practice. And if you want to grow at encouragement, there's nothing like practicing it. So come to church; join a home group; look our for those on the edge; and simply begin to develop Barnabas' characteristics of your own.

Number 4: Train yourself to look for evidences of God's grace. In Acts Luke tells us that Barnabas saw the grace of God at Antioch. But he could have missed it, couldn't he. He could have concentrated on all the things that were wrong. And so can we. But he didn't. So make it your habit to look for evidences of God's grace: in your parents, or your friend, in your husband or wife, in your boss, or here at church. Is there stuff that's wrong that needs addressing? Of course! And we'd never improve if we didn't. But you and they will be way happier if we do it through loving encouragement than criticism. So train yourself to look for, talk about, celebrate, encourage what God is doing, rather than pointing out what he isn't. Speaking personally, I've tried to do this, and seriously, I am so much happier as a result. So, if you think I'm miserable now, you should have seen what I was like before.

Finally, Number 5, Be filled with the Spirit. Barnabas was a man full of the Spirit. And Jesus described the Spirit as the *paraklete* - the one who stand by your side as your comforter, your advocate, your defence attorney. It's one of the words that gets translated elsewhere as encouragement. So daily come to God and ask him to fill you with the Spirit of encouragement - and then start spreading it around.