

Barnabas

Caroline Hodgson *reflects on* Acts 11:19-end, Galatians 2:1-10 and John 15:12-17

There's a danger that we remember Barnabas only as the disciple who parted ways with Paul. Our three readings today form a kind of arc describing their relationship, and is useful to think about as a blueprint for life in a church community or, indeed, any kind of community.

The background (Acts 9:26-28) was that Barnabas had persuaded his fellow disciples of Paul's genuineness, when they were still, understandably, highly suspicious of this persecutor of their faith. Today we read of the relationship between the two men at the height of its productivity: "for an entire year they met... and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'".

The reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians has a decidedly spikier tone, with talk of "false believers", spying "so that they might enslave us". It's possible to see how a relationship might start to become strained in an atmosphere of suspicion. Nevertheless when Paul and Barnabas did part company, it wasn't over a doctrinal matter, but a logistical disagreement over whether John Mark should accompany them. But their difference of opinion and divergence of ways doesn't mean that either was disobedient to Jesus' beautiful words in John's Gospel, to "love one another as I have loved you". If anything, it may have meant that the word spread even further afield.

It's not unusual for church communities to experience conflict, turbulence and division. It's rarely much fun, indeed it's often painful, but it is possible that it is in line with God's will. ☺



Barnabas, by Charles Joseph Lameire, St Francis Xavier's Church, Paris

Spiritual journalling A place for honest prayer

by Katharine Smith

Writing in our spiritual journal can be a way of expressing honestly to God what's going on in our lives, telling God about our thoughts and emotions no matter how dark or "unchristian" they may seem. We could write an impassioned letter, crying out our anger, frustration, desolation or fear and demanding answers. That's the kind of writing we find in many psalms. Or perhaps

we prefer to write something more detailed and explanatory as a way of clarifying our thoughts and feelings to ourselves.

Whatever we write, our journal is a safe place for honesty and the very act of writing may bring healing. As we unburden ourselves to God, chaotic thoughts may become more ordered and strong feelings are calmed. When we look back on what we've written we may well see that God was answering our prayers even as we were writing them. ☺

“If prayer stands as the place where God and human beings meet, then I must learn about prayer. Most of my struggles in the Christian life circle around the same two themes: why God doesn't act the way we want God to, and why I don't act the way God wants me to. Prayer is the precise point where those themes converge.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author

Lord, grant me the wisdom to understand the place of conflict and division, and the courage and grace to continue to love throughout. Amen.

Richard Baxter

by Katharine Smith

Richard Baxter is celebrated on Wednesday. Katharine Smith tells us about him.

Born in Shropshire in 1615, Richard Baxter studied divinity and was ordained after becoming disillusioned by the moral standards of the court of King James I, where he served. He lived and worked in Kidderminster for fifteen years between 1641 and 1661 (with an absence during the Civil War, which he opposed).

He was active in the restoration of Charles II, but his continuing dissatisfaction with the episcopacy led him

to decline the See of Hereford, which in turn led to him being debarred from taking further office in the Church. But he continued to preach and write in the face of persecution and imprisonment.

Baxter introduced new ideas in his ministry such as house groups to discuss sermons and a system of pastoral visitation. A writer, reformer and pastor, his life, work and integrity in refusing to compromise his beliefs speak to us today. We hear his message in his hymn "Ye Holy Angels Bright" –

"Let all thy days, till life shall end, what'er he send, be filled with praise." ☺