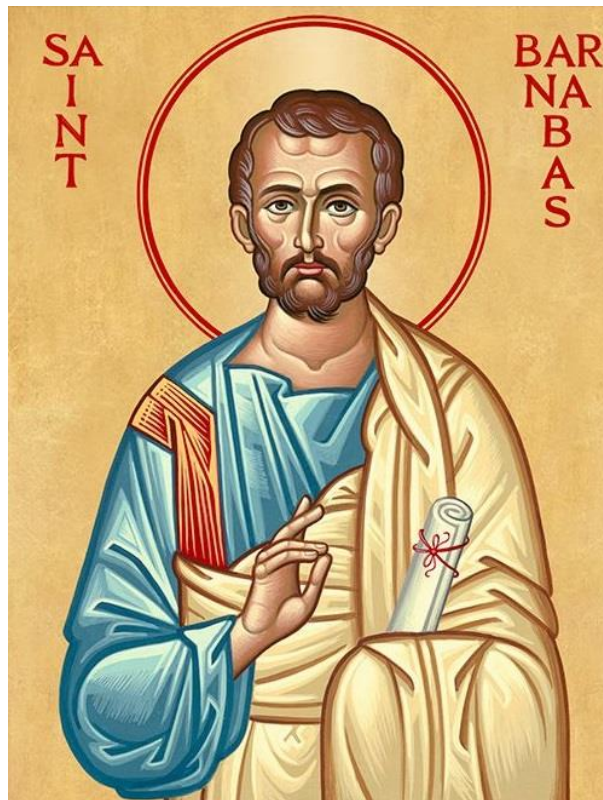


STORYTIME:

“The Story of St. Barnabas”



Sometimes the most interesting people in the Bible are ignored or forgotten or simply overlooked. Frequently, however, you can piece together enough scattered details to get a better sense of who they were and what they did. Such is the case with the Apostle Barnabas, who becomes so overshadowed by his student understudy, St. Paul, that the story of St. Barnabas, Paul's teacher and mentor, is often missed. Yet from what we know of Barnabas, he was a remarkable fellow.

Barnabas was a Jew of the Diaspora, a Hellenist like Paul, in contrast to the Palestinian Jews like Peter, who were called

"Hebrews" by the author of Acts (6.1). According to Acts, there was a large company of Hellenists in Jerusalem at the celebration of Pentecost fifty days after the Crucifixion, and many of them became part of the first Christian community there in Jerusalem. Barnabas appears to have been one of the first converts of the Christian faith after the disciples went out into the streets at Pentecost spreading the good news.

The early Jerusalem church was a remarkable group. According to the Scriptures, the "company of those who believed (in Jerusalem) were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas, (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, obviously a wealthy man, sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4.32, 34-7). Barnabas was therefore the first mentioned of those within the Church at Jerusalem who sold their property for the benefit of poor.

After the stoning of Stephen and the martyrdom of St. James, the brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem Church, a

great persecution of Christians arose and most of the Christians in the city fled into Judea and Samaria (Acts 8.1ff). But Barnabas did not flee as the others had, for he was there when the newly converted Paul came to Jerusalem and attempted to join the disciples. But the disciples were all afraid of Paul, for they did not believe that he who had been a persecutor of the church was now a true disciple. According to the Scriptures, it was Barnabas who went out and met Paul, and who then introduced him to the apostles, after which Paul was sent off to Tarsus for several years to escape those who were attempting to kill him. Barnabas, on the other hand, was sent by the church in Jerusalem to assist the Christian community at Antioch, which was flourishing (Acts 11.19-22), and was where the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians". As the work of the Antiochene church continued to prosper and even more workers were needed, Barnabas traveled to Tarsus and brought Paul back with him to help.

Eventually the flourishing Christian community at Antioch decided to send missionaries of their own to other cities, and they chose for this task Barnabas and Paul. Thus Barnabas and Paul have traditionally been called Apostles, though neither of them were part of the original Twelve chosen by Jesus. They were called "apostles" because the early Church at Antioch sent them out as missionaries, and the word "apostle" literally means "one

who is sent." While Paul is the more famous for his missionary travels, because of his numerous epistles that later became part of the New Testament, Barnabas was, in fact, clearly the leader of this first missionary journey, and Paul was only his assistant (cf. Acts 14.12, 14, 20). This is apparent in several different ways, but the most obvious is when they arrived at Lystra, the citizens there thought they were gods, and they called Paul, Hermes the messenger, and Barnabas, they called Zeus, the king of the gods (Acts 14.12). The other way to tell that Barnabas was the leader is that his name is always listed first, before Paul's.

After this first journey the two apostles returned to the Jerusalem Council to give a report of their activities, and again Barnabas is clearly seen as the leader, who speaks for the two of them (Acts 15.12, 25). However when Barnabas and Paul prepare to go off on a second missionary journey there arose a dispute between them, because Barnabas wanted to take with them again his cousin John Mark (Col. 4.10), but Paul did not want to take John Mark with them as he had dropped out in the middle of the last trip. "And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and departed overland by way of Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 15.38-40).

From there the activities of the Apostle Barnabas are lost in the pages of history, while those of his understudy Paul are immortalized in the pages of the Scriptures. Barnabas also continued to travel widely for the Church, for Paul later mentions him in his letters as if Barnabas were well known to the Christians at Galatia (Gal. 2.1, 13), and at Corinth (1 Cor. 9.6), and possibly to the Colossians (Col. 4.10). Tradition knows Barnabas as of the founder of the Christian community at Milan, where the relics of his cousin John Mark also lie. Barnabas is also celebrated as first bishop of the church on the island of Cyprus, where Barnabas was from and where according to legend, four or five years before Paul was beheaded in Rome, Barnabas was martyred at Salamis on Cyprus, in the year 61 A.D.

In the end Barnabas' career was much like that of his understudy Paul, whom he introduced to the apostles in Jerusalem and whom he led on their first missionary journey. Barnabas was a dedicated and generous Christian, selling his property for the benefit of the poor and staying behind in Jerusalem during the great persecution after Stephen's stoning. Afterwards Barnabas, like Paul, traveled widely and founded new Christian communities. And like Paul, Barnabas may have written letters that were later cherished by the Church. For according to Tertullian, Barnabas was the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. And another letter, the so-called Epistle of Barnabas,

was considered a part of the New Testament among the North African churches from the end of the second century until the end of the fourth century, when the current New Testament canon was finalized. And in the end Barnabas, like Paul, gave his life in witness to Jesus.

Barnabas may not be as well remembered by Christians today as Paul is, but he should not be ignored or forgotten, for Barnabas was indeed one of the early heroes of the young Christian community, who heard the voice of the Good Shepherd call him by name, and who followed where he led. AMEN