

**Sermon for Evensong** Jenny Sinclair

*on the Feast of St Barnabas,  
139<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the dedication of Mossley Hill Church, Liverpool  
Sunday 15 June 2014 at 4pm*

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In the early years of this parish, a hundred years ago, your predecessors here at Mossley Hill made an significant act of generosity. They founded your daughter church of St Barnabas, originally as a 'tin cathedral', for a growing community around Penny Lane. They marked their centenary last week on June 11, the Feast of St Barnabas, while this church celebrates its 139<sup>th</sup> anniversary today and All Hallows will celebrate the same next year. Your three church communities have lived through many changes. Another anniversary falls around this time too - my father was installed as Bishop of Liverpool 39 years ago on the Feast of St Barnabas.

But going back a bit further, what about Barnabas himself? Today we are right in the middle of his 'Octave' or 8-day feast period.

His given name was Joseph but the apostles gave him the Hebrew name Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." He was a people person, an encourager. We see him and Paul as leaders of the church in the city of Antioch. Barnabas is known as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit - he deliberately encounters people, listens to them and welcomes each person warmly. Encouragement can be a great act of Grace. And what Paul and Barnabas find themselves doing is to preach the gospel to Gentiles for the first time. So their ministry was to join two estranged groups of people together, Jews and Gentiles - by showing them what they shared in common - their faith in Jesus Christ. And the rest is history. So Barnabas shows us the importance of building bridges across difference.

And in that very challenging passage from Acts earlier, we heard how Barnabas and the others lived: '*There were no needy persons among them*'. The ancient Christian challenge. This is what Christians involved in politics have wrestled with for years. It's a bit too challenging, isn't it? How far away are we from that kingdom principle?

We can see that something profound is happening in our society - our political economy is increasingly favouring the rich - 'economic recovery' is felt just by a few, but has a hollow ring for most ordinary people who experience the hard fact of fast widening

inequality. It's a story of estrangement. Economic growth is an inadequate measure of success. While most of us live fairly comfortably, the bottom is falling out of our society.

But we haven't just allowed the markets to become too powerful. The welfare state too - created to be an answer to that ancient Christian challenge of meeting people's needs - has grown too powerful and we can now see it generates dependency. This, together with years of liberalism and individualism, has weakened our sense of community - people have lost trust in each other and in institutions. People are disillusioned with the way that politics has become polarised left and right - even the politicians feel trapped.

As Christians we must not be complacent about this dysfunctional situation. Civil society has been weakened and the symptoms are clear: it is the most vulnerable who are bearing the pain and the total picture threatens our democracy.

So what can you and I do about it? How could we do justice to that ancient Christian challenge? I'd suggest we take a look at the Common Good. In fact, Barnabas can help us here - in the *Epistle of St Barnabas*, he says:

*"Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good."*

He says we mustn't be inward looking - what does that mean? Maybe we should intentionally go out of our way to engage with others. He says we must gather together to seek the Common Good - what does that mean? Maybe we should build relationships across our differences and negotiate solutions that work for everyone. He is prompting us to get involved.

The Common Good is all about human dignity - it is the set of conditions that allows every person to flourish without exception. But it isn't the same thing as the 'big society'. Volunteering is part of the solution and charity may be essential in the short term but without justice it is palliative and risks propping up the structures that generate inequality - and let's be honest, it can be a convenient way for the comfortable to keep the poor at arm's length. What is required is structural change. We need to be asking questions about the 'structural sin' that generates inequality and how this demeans us all.

The Common Good is an ancient idea whose time has come. Different cultures have related ideas, like the African concept of Ubuntu: 'I am because you are'. But the Common Good is not just a nice woolly concept. It requires different interests to be prepared to honour the sovereignty of the other and to be willing to negotiate solutions that benefit every human person. It is a new way of living, a practice.

I am involved in *Together for the Common Good*: we draw inspiration from the groundbreaking Sheppard Worlock partnership here in Liverpool – like Barnabas they were great encouragers of communities. They showed us that we are more than the sum of our parts, and benefit from each other’s complementary gifts.

Our view is that an alliance for the Common Good can be built between Christians of different traditions, fellow faith communities and secular allies to strengthen civil society. But the collaboration required needs to be intentional and focused on structural change through negotiation. We need to take seriously the interests in our society that are alienated from each other, respect the positions of each, and help to facilitate a settlement between them that enables all to thrive.

The practice of the Common Good is most effectively expressed within the context of the principles of Catholic social thought – like others we are finding that rich body of thinking is a gift. In fact it is intended for ‘all people of goodwill’ - Archbishop Justin is a fan and frequently refers to it. So why not ask your Catholic friends to tell you about the principles and see how together, you can put them to work?

For our part, we encourage different Christian traditions to collaborate in several different ways. We are holding cross-party cross-denomination conversations in Parliament, and developing a Common Good Conversation model bringing together people of estranged positions to discuss subjects like housing and money. We’ve brought together some of the leading thinkers on the Common Good to produce a book to be published next year, and we are preparing to share the results of our research into ecumenical joint action for social justice.

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In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks about being members of one body:

*‘If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.’*

In other words, we are all weakened if some are excluded from the opportunity to flourish. But within the ancient – and new - paradigm of the Common Good, tackling poverty and exclusion cannot mean demonising the opposition! It can no longer mean classic anti-poverty, anti-homelessness campaigning – while this is well intentioned it is polarising: it alienates the very people it hopes to persuade. It presumes a battle rather than a dialogue. Instead, all parties need to meet - and negotiate. This is the only way that elite interests will not dominate the poor. It won’t be easy but we need a new settlement. It is a new way of living.

So what might Barnabas be saying to us today through this special anniversary? Perhaps he wants us to look outwardly. Perhaps he wants us to bring people together to discern what needs to happen for every person in this community, this city, to flourish? That is how the Common Good will be revealed – through a conversation, specific to time and place. For a Common Good solution to be genuine, it will involve all parties concerned, and be in a permanent state of renegotiation, responding to the changing needs of all involved. It will challenge vested interests and there will be resistance – so you can see it is a rigorous practice. In some circumstances perhaps a professional facilitator will be needed. Wherever there is polarity, it's always the vulnerable, the least powerful, who suffer. However when they are included in the conversation, the negotiation - their involvement humanises the process and it becomes clear that movement on all sides is required if all are to flourish.

Jean Vanier is right that it's through deep encounter, living and working alongside the least powerful, vulnerable members of the community that the strong discover their own humanity. Deprivation and exclusion are forms of abandonment and humiliation.

And it's through working side-by-side with people of other traditions that we will learn to trust. Focus not on each other's differences but on the value we place on human dignity, our shared territory. The key is to face outward and not inward. It's all in the body language – by standing side-by-side and focusing on a joint project you cannot focus inward. It is humbling and militates against pride.

By acting together, we will embody reconciliation and our witness will encourage others to do the same. By cultivating relationships across difference, one by one, we will build up civil society.

This is what we mean by being agents of change for the Common Good. The Common Good will only come about if everyone does their little bit. A thousand small steps. We will need to be in the space between interests that are at odds with each other and be instruments of reconciliation. I hope this might resonate with you in your 'Communities of Blessing'. Be intentional about breaking down barriers that block human community.

Ask yourself who is estranged? How about facilitating a conversation between them. How about partnering with a parish in a disadvantaged community? We move forward through the language we use; through collaborating with others whose views we may not share; through supporting projects that build up the Common Good - like the Living Wage and Community Land Trusts - and resisting things that work against it, like top-down governance that excludes employees in decision making.

Our spiritual lives are nourished by prayer but will be limited if we keep the real world at arm's length. Our faith is not a leisure interest – we need to take it to work. It's a holistic life-changing transformation. We're not always going to get it right but we need to get stuck in. Pope Francis says that by virtue of our baptism, we 'are all missionary disciples'. So we are all called to play a part.

For my part, I came to all this by a very circuitous route. Being a bishop's daughter was an unwelcome burden when I was young and I couldn't find what I was looking for in the church and left - I was a bit of a rebel in my teens here in Liverpool. In my mid 20s I encountered Catholicism. I put up a strong resistance but had a powerful conversion experience and was received into the Catholic Church. It felt like coming home, and led to the beginning of a spiritual journey.

One day three years ago, a few months after my mother died I found myself drawing a cross on the back of an envelope, with the words + ecumenism and social justice. It felt as if God had brought me through my own rather messy journey in order to carry forward something. But I felt completely out of my depth and had no idea what the first step should be. I just prayed and tried my best to listen. That is how Together for the Common Good started. Some people now describe it as a movement but that's not by our design: there's no doubt it is the work of the Holy Spirit. We just try to keep listening and discern the next steps.

If you hand over controls to God something unpredictable will happen, something good. God's way is different from ours, his timing is different too. That's the way he works.

If you, like me, feel out of your depth, inadequate or 'unworthy' it's reassuring to know we're in good company. Moses, David, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul all knew what it was like to feel unworthy. If you want examples of people in the Bible who thought they had it all together, then your examples are Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod and the Pharisees. Which group would you like to identify with? And neither Moses nor Jeremiah felt they were qualified for the roles God had in mind. Pope Francis says his favourite painting is of St Matthew by Caravaggio, where Matthew is being chosen by God and saying 'Who, me?, surely you don't mean me?' God works through our weak efforts and our clumsy abilities.

There is a choice before each of us – either we can leave it to others, or quietly we can make a deeply personal choice of God over self. Keep it simple. Jesus will do the rest; he will give you the grace to do whatever he wants you to do.

Barnabas was an encourager, a people person, and helped to build communities in

which every person thrived. He was a great collaborator with God. So his message is a message of encouragement to us:

*“Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good.”*

Sometimes it's not always clear what we should be doing and what God wants for us? Whatever it is, it's unlikely to manifest in grand gestures but much more likely to happen in small steps. Archbishop Justin suggested in his new year message that “each of us should try.... to set our eyes on changing the world around us.”

It is difficult to believe in hope when we are surrounded by messages of hopelessness and cynicism. But Jesus tells us not to be afraid. He has called us to be Friends, and through the Holy Spirit he will give us the graces we need. We are in good company - all the apostles, the saints have had the same ‘slowness of heart to believe’. They are ready and waiting to encourage us. All we need to do is to ask for the grace to listen to God and for the courage to act.

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[www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk](http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk)

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*Selected readings for the occasion*

**New Testament reading** suggestion: Acts 4: 32 – 37

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.*

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**Old Testament reading** suggestion: Isaiah 42:1-4 (The Servant of the LORD)

42 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
<sup>2</sup> He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
<sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
<sup>4</sup> he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”