

This past Wednesday the Church celebrated the memorial of St Barnabas. St Barnabas, you might recall, wasn't just early Church but was there from the very beginning. He was a companion of the Apostles themselves and later a companion of St Paul. We get used to thinking of St Paul as leading the missionary work, mainly because of his inspired writings that comprise much of the New Testament. While there is a large grain of truth to that, it is probably actually more accurate to say that St Paul was the companion of Barnabas. What happened, as related in the Acts of the Apostles, is that the Apostles heard about the conversions taking place in the ancient city of Antioch (in modern day Turkey). Of course, they were happy to hear this news and so they sent Barnabas (from Jerusalem) to see it firsthand and speak with the new converts. After that, he went to Tarsus to see Paul, and it was Barnabas who led Paul into their first missionary journey.

Scripture says: "When he [Barnabas] arrived [in Antioch] and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all..." Barnabas encouraged them. The word 'bar' in Hebrew means 'son.' You might recall that some translations of the Gospels, for example, retain the term 'bar' when referring to St Peter as: Simon bar-Jonah, which means: Simon, son of Jonah. Pope Benedict XVI, then, pointed out that the name Barnabas means: son of encouragement. But why would the disciples need encouragement? If you set some chocolate cake and ice cream in front of a bunch of kids (or the pastor for that matter!), do they need encouragement to dig in? Not much! Encouragement is needed for things that are difficult, for things we'd just as soon turn back from, things that demand sacrifice of self (i.e., love) in order to carry out. The arrogant do not need encouragement (except encouragement to repent), the disciples of our Lord do, and the Lord Himself provides it.

The next important step is to think about the nature of this encouragement. In our desire to comfort others or relieve their suffering (which is a good desire) we might sometimes be inclined to "encourage" them to just satisfy or give in to their desires. But this is not the nature of the encouragement given by St Barnabas to the new Catholics in Antioch, it is not the nature of encouragement that comes from Heaven. Scripture says he "encouraged them all to: remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart.

The memorial of Mary, Mother of the Church celebrated this past Monday brings out another example of this encouragement from Heaven and the nature of that encouragement. One of my favorite prefigurements of our Holy Mother is from the Book of Maccabees. The Jewish leaders had betrayed God and their own people by going to the Greeks (who were *the* "world power" at the time) and making a deal with them, which included casting aside Jewish worship and law that had been given to them by God Himself. Now there were Jews who resisted this and remained faithful to the Lord. One of them was a mother with 7 sons. The mother and sons were all taken into custody, told to conform to "the new deal," threatened, and tortured. The sons would not yield. What made them so firm in the face of such brutal persecution and death? Of course ultimately it is the grace of God. But God also provided them tangible, exterior support – a means of His grace we might say. That source was their mother. Sacred Scripture says she encouraged them all with these words: "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws." They tortured and killed the sons in order of birth. They finally came to the youngest, who would not listen to them or yield either. So the persecutors went to their mother and said – you convince him for us. Speaking again in their native tongue so the torturers could not understand, she said to him: "My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers."

How sad it is if the only thing a person sees in this is the suffering of the mother and her sons. Of course it was painful and should be sympathized with. But if that's as far as a person takes it, if *all* it does is provoke an emotional response, if a person remains only earthbound in their thinking and cannot see the faith, strength,

glory, and genuine love of this mother and her sons, if they cannot see their great victory, they will never be able to receive genuine encouragement from Heaven; they will not know genuine love; they will not know God. They will be stuck in desires for this life and this world. Notice the completely selfless love that this mother had for her sons. She willingly accepted intense suffering for the true and ultimate good of her sons. She had the good sense – called faith – to desire the best for her sons, namely eternal life.

Any boy or man who desires real manhood – and most do unless it's somehow snuffed out by outside forces – would desire such a loving mother. Someone to say to them: stay firm my son, hold the course. Someone to encourage them in the way of real life. In fact, we all have such a mother – our Lord gave her to us, her name is Mary. Mothers (and fathers) love your sons (and daughters); learn The Way yourself, teach it to them, and then encourage them in it. In this way you will imitate God's greatest and most loved creature, Mary our Mother. This is real wisdom, something badly needed in our world today.

Our Lord also provides direct encouragement, in addition to that which He provides through His good servants. He exhorts us to hold firm in the face of trial (which is the nature of love, an *act* of love) in various ways, sometimes by reminding us of the consequences of casting it aside. Such was the case in last Tuesday's Gospel. Our Lord said to the disciples (not His enemies but His *disciples*): you are to be the salt of the earth; but if salt loses its saltiness, it is good for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. He is telling us first of all that we can lose Heaven; it is not: once saved always saved, that we must endure to the end...and He is exhorting (encouraging) us to do just that. He does not want to see us lose our eternal life.

Sacred Scripture (Book of Sirach) says: My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation. These temptations assail a person both interiorly and exteriorly. They assail everyone, every day to one extent or another; some are bigger, some are smaller. This is largely why a person needs encouragement in the faith. As a person yields more and more to "small" things, it opens them up to bigger and bigger things. They might start, for example, as a temptation against prayer. Then when that's accomplished, and we don't replenish ourselves with Confession and a firm purpose of amendment, then we can go a little further bringing us closer and closer to full despair, to give up, to quit. Temptations, even bigger ones, can come in all sorts of specific forms. For those with a vocation to marriage, it could even be a temptation to quit their marriage, or at least turn against their spouse with bitterness. For a priest who truly has a vocation to priesthood, it might be to quit the priesthood, or something more subtle – to quit trying to teach the truths of the faith, hold back, keep silent, go with the flow otherwise...well otherwise I might end up like our Lord – crucified. How easy it is to convince ourselves that we love God and neighbor while the whole time denying Him and only loving self. Nobody cares anyway, the temptation might go, what's the point, it doesn't make any difference; this is what makes people happy and gets me smiley faces. Heavenly encouragement, encouragement to endure to the end, to overcome temptation, is needed even on a daily basis. St Barnabus, pray for us.

Let's conclude with this last statement: heavenly encouragement is needed on a daily basis. How is a person to receive it? There are a number of things but let's start with the one staring us in the face with this article, namely weekday Mass. All of the encouragements discussed here flowed out of **weekday Mass**. We will continue to try to make this as available as possible to as many people as possible but regardless of what is done with scheduling, it's something a person has to choose. Have you considered trying to make it to weekday Mass at least once a week? If not, why not? Our Lord will not be outdone in charity. If a person makes a sacrifice to be there, our Lord will respond. Weekday Mass is a great aid in truly making God first. Someone might (be tempted to) ask themselves: can I afford the time? In spite of the ridiculous busyness of life today, the real question is: can I afford not to? Now it is possible for motives to be, or to become, corrupted through pride; I do have to guard myself against the temptation to start patting myself on the back or thinking that I am better than the other; my goal has to simply be: to be with the Lord. All good things in this life can be corrupted, but that is not a reason not to do them but rather a reason to embrace that foundational virtue of humility. What are some other things? Come back to that good mother from Maccabees. She knew the faith. Notice that to encourage her sons, she spoke dogmatic truths to them. Make time to study the faith. It will not only encourage you, it will make you capable of encouraging others. *God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*