

## *ORDINARY HEROES*

### *Best Supporting Actor*

Apparently, there are over 8 million different ways that the 23 pairs of chromosomes in a female cell can be selected to form an egg. In the same way there are over 8 million different ways that the 23 pairs of chromosomes in the male cell can be selected from the sperm.

Any one of the 8 million combinations in a female egg can fuse with any one of the 8 million combinations in the sperm. This means there are 64 million, million ways of arranging 23 pairs of chromosomes in a person!

That is more than the number of people who have ever lived! Point is – you are unique. And that is without considering a whole host of other factors that influence, have an impact on and determine a person's character, temperament, abilities and gift mix.

Truth is, and we know this, we are all different, completely unique. And for a short moment at the beginning of this talk, I want us to pause and celebrate our uniqueness. I recognize that it is likely that some of us will find this easier than others. This, though, is about recognising before God, now, in these moments, that we are all created unique... and in the eyes of the Creator God, uniquely special.

I'm going to invite you to engage with this for a moment by holding your hands open in front of you and looking at them. Look at them and recognise that there is no other pair of hands here this morning, or anywhere, that are the same as your hands. Your hands belong to a body that houses a mix of gifts, talents and abilities that are found in no other body. Your hands belong to a person who thinks, feels, cares, loves and acts in ways that no-one else does, and your hands belong to a child of God who is loved with a love that makes you beautiful!

I'm going to invite you to hold that in your heart and mind as we go through the rest of this talk this morning.

On the road to Capernaum an argument broke out. "How come you, Peter, James and John seem to get special treatment from the Master? How come he only took you guys up the mountain yesterday?"

“Anyway, looking after the finances is the most important thing – where would we be without proper control of the money?”

“Not that you are any good at it” came the response.

“We only payed our taxes because Jesus caught that fish with the coin in its mouth!”

“Anyway, he chose me first! And he used my boat to speak to the crowds from!”

“Steady on Peter. Remember I introduced you to the Master. Don’t forget that!”

“Yes, alright – but which of you served the Master a banquet like I did and had him in your home as the honoured guest? Not sure he would want to go to your house!” retorted Mathew

“All well and good, but what the Master wants and needs are people like me – people with fire in their bellies,” piped Simon the Zealot from the back of the group.

Thomas, irritated by the conversation so far, held his hands out in protest and said; “Too many of you lot have your heads in the clouds. What the Master’s mission needs is practical people. People like me!”

When they reached Capernaum, Jesus asked: “What were you arguing about on the way here?”

No-one spoke because they had been arguing about who was the greatest!

Jesus said; “You guys must realise, it’s not like that in the kingdom of the heavens.” (Mark 9 v 33-37)

We live in a very competitive world. It seems to me that in every sphere of life today, we are invited to believe that only winning will satisfy. Coming second in any sport is...well, failure!

Apparently, people who win bronze medals are happier than those who win silver – which just isn’t gold! We are, everywhere, encouraged to climb the ladder of success – to be bigger, better, stronger than everyone else. The truth about winning is that one can only win if someone else loses!

Now, don't get me wrong, competition can be a good thing. Healthy competition can bring out the best in me, stretching me, challenging me, helping me to go further than I ever could alone. It can make a business healthier, more holistic, become safer, wiser, more aware of its responsibilities. Healthy competition can inspire us to become more creative and explore new things in new ways. Healthy competition can be good in many different ways.

But it can become destructive. How many sportspeople, businesses, communities and relationships have been destroyed through competition? And competition can lead us to live by comparison – always comparing ourselves to others, and comparing ourselves to others can be damaging in so many ways.

My best guess is that some of us found the beginning of this talk uncomfortable because we have spent so much of our lives living in competition with others... and spend a lot of our time comparing ourselves to others. So, what's all this got to do with Barnabas, I hear you ask?

Well, perhaps Barnabas is an example of someone who was able to negotiate this kind of territory well. Barnabas has been 'first' in the church for a number of years now. He is a respected leader. He has been instrumental in the development of the ministry of Saul, the persecutor turned teacher. He has been sent to Antioch to wrestle with the huge challenge of the wrong sorts of people becoming followers of Christ.

He is a man with authority, respect, wisdom. He has been the key leader in the growing church for 18 years, and so far, he has been the senior partner in the Barnabas and Saul teaching partnership. But, after all this, Barnabas, it seems, is able to hold it lightly. He is able to accept graciously, the change that is about to come.

<sup>9</sup> Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, <sup>10</sup> "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. <sup>12</sup> When the proconsul saw

what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

In Pisidian Antioch

<sup>13</sup> From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. (Acts 13 v 9-13)

What we see beginning to happen here is that Saul now also called Paul, is beginning to become more prominent. We have to be careful not to read more into the text than is there, but when confronted by Elymas the sorcerer, Paul speaks and Barnabas does not. The text also tells us that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and is silent about Barnabas. It may well be that Barnabas was able to recognise that, again, God was at work in a new way... and on this occasion was going to use Paul rather than himself.

Barnabas took a risk and let Paul take the lead and the initiative. My best guess is that Barnabas was glad to see that God was at work through Paul – just as he had been glad to see God at work in Antioch.

One commentator writes: When you don't have to be first, you're free to celebrate when others are blessed. Perhaps we could also say: When you don't have to compare yourself to others, you're free to celebrate when others are blessed.

How are you doing? In general? At home? At work? With your friends? In church?

<sup>8</sup> In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. <sup>9</sup> He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed <sup>10</sup> and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

<sup>11</sup> When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!"

<sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. <sup>13</sup> The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

<sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: <sup>15</sup> “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. <sup>16</sup> In the past, he let all nations go their own way. <sup>17</sup> Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” <sup>18</sup> Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

<sup>19</sup> Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. <sup>20</sup> But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

#### The Return to Antioch in Syria

<sup>21</sup> They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. <sup>23</sup> Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. <sup>24</sup> After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, <sup>25</sup> and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia.

In the remote town of Lystra, Paul healed a lame man and the town went wild! They declared Paul and Barnabas gods because they couldn't explain what had happened any other way. They remembered an ancient legend where Zeus and Hermes had visited here before and richly rewarded the couple who welcomed them, destroying all who didn't. So, they wanted to do the same for Barnabas and Paul – to elevate them to god like status, welcome them, reap the rewards and save themselves from destruction.

Once, at the end of mid-week church, the small child of one of those present, looked at me, then said to her mother “Mummy, is he God?” The mother turned to her daughter and replied “No, he just thinks he is!” True story!

Trouble is, I can, sometimes, be tempted to think that I am – God, that is! And so can you, can't you?

Satan said to Adam and Eve, if you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you will be like God! Adam and Eve fell for it and we've been falling for it ever since.

When Paul and Barnabas figured out something was wrong they tore their clothes. In Biblical culture you would tear the clothes on your back as a sign of mourning, distress or to protest against blasphemy.

Barnabas and Paul wanted to make it absolutely clear they were not gods. In fact, they wanted to make it absolutely clear they were as human as everybody else. When we fall for Satan's lie we can easily lose sight of the truth that we are human beings. We can succumb to the temptations to make ourselves the hero of our own story:

When we become competitive to the point where being first is all that matters...

When we insist on comparing ourselves with others and become dissatisfied with who we really are...

When we believe our own press, or the press that others sometimes throw at us...

We can live to be the hero of our story, and the tragedy then is that, perhaps, we miss the very life that God so wants to give us. I expect that for all of us this is a work in progress. It is most certainly that for me – writing this talk has given me much cause for thought.

It's interesting and challenging to note how quickly the crowd changed its mind about Barnabas and Paul. They stoned Paul and left him for dead!

Sometimes people talk about playing to an audience of one. What they mean by that is that, while the opinions of family, loved ones, friends, colleagues, is often important, perhaps we should focus most on what God thinks of us. It turns out that he loves you with a love that makes you beautiful. He wants you, longs for you to reach your full redemptive potential and he knows just which of those 64 million, million combinations you are. He has your best interests at heart.

So, maybe, rather than living to be the hero of your own story, you could be like Barnabas and settle for best supporting actor in God's bigger and far better story – when he is the hero!

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2019, by Rev. Ian Phillips.