

ORDINARY HEROES

The Bigger Picture

There is a challenging truth that is present here among us this morning: It's called a second-choice world. A second-choice world is the world as it is, not as we would choose it to be. My best guess is, that right now, in these moments, all of us are in one area of life, at least, living in a second-choice world. That is, that in one area of life, at least, life is not as we would choose it to be.

Second-choice worlds come about for varied and different reasons. Sometimes second-choice worlds are thrust upon us and we have no choice in them: the sudden, unexpected death of a loved one, friend, colleague; the diagnosis we didn't want to hear.

Sometimes second-choice worlds come about because we have to live in the consequences of the choice of others: the breakdown of a marriage or relationship that we might not have chosen; the actions of those close to us that necessarily have an impact on our lives.

Sometimes we are plunged into a second-choice world through circumstances beyond our control: the news that we will be made redundant.

Sometimes though, second-choice worlds come about because of our own choices, actions or decisions. Sometime we are the cause of our second-choice worlds for us and for others.

And my best guess, this morning, is that all of us here are, in one area of life at least, living in a second-choice world. It is not the world as we would like it to be, or choose it to be. But the truth is, that's where we are, that's how the world really is right now, and that's where we have to live!

Here's a challenging statement: Everything is broken! On first hearing that, it sounds a bit negative, doesn't it? We're Christians, I hear you cry! We are saved by grace! Yes! Yes, we are! And what a glorious and wonderful truth that is! We are, indeed, loved more than we will or can ever know, with a love that makes us beautiful. We are. We live in the glorious, wonderful and profound truth that the most magnificent God, who created us, knows us and loves us and holds us in his hands.

We know that the world does not just consist of that which we can see and touch, we know and understand that there is a bigger and a far better story than the one we can see in front of us. That is all deeply, wonderfully and profoundly true. And yet, it is also true that we all live, in at least one area of life, in a second-choice world....and we do so, because everything is broken.

Barnabas and Paul are towers of the early church. Barnabas has been the 'go-to' man for wisdom, in figuring out how to live as a Christian in a challenging and hostile world. He has invested in a young man called Saul when others would have rejected him and refused to trust him. He has encouraged Saul by inviting him to teach with him in Antioch, bringing him out of the wilderness of Tarsus.

Saul, now known as Paul, has grown in his faith and his confidence. He has begun to take a more prominent role and has experienced the divine presence of God in his ministry. In Acts chapter 15 they have both been part of the council of Jerusalem – a most significant council in the spread of the gospel. The council settled the issue of gentile circumcision: you can become a follower of Christ without becoming Jewish. Grace had triumphed over law! And Barnabas and Paul were there together! But then we read this:

³⁶ Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Acts 15 v 36-41)

Everything is broken! Up to now the relationship between these two ordinary heroes has been dynamic, supernatural, brave and world changing! And suddenly, bang! And to be sure, this is no small bang – this is about as big as it can get. The way Luke describes it here implies violent action and emotion. This wasn't a small disagreement; this was a blazing row! Two men who, together, were changing the world, now their relationship irreparably damaged.

Two great men, but two flawed, fallen, ordinary human beings. Everything is broken! They would never work together again! Maybe, maybe, second-

choice worlds for them both. It is, if we're honest, a slightly sad picture of these two towers of the early church, isn't it?

Luke doesn't really make a comment and certainly not a judgement about what happened. He does record that Paul and Silas were commanded – 'Go to Syria and Cilicia' by the church in Antioch, where Barnabas and John Mark sailed for Cyprus, seemingly without commendation. But we need to be careful what we read into the text. There is, however, no record of them trying to work things out: no meeting, no praying, no mediation as far as we can tell. Disappointing, don't you think?

How are you doing?

Some of us, probably all of us, know the pain that I'm guessing Barnabas and Paul experienced through this. Truth is, we are like Barnabas and Paul: we are flawed, fallen, ordinary human beings. And sometimes we get it wrong – and sometimes badly wrong. Everything is broken – including you and me!

Barnabas and Paul fell out over who to take on a trip to encourage churches – slightly ironic, don't you think? They simply could not agree who should go with them – a disagreement that shattered a relationship! Maybe some of us have been there. Maybe some of us are living it now. Maybe that is our second-choice world - a relationship, or relationships that once were greatly valued, now broken beyond repair!

The truth is, as we see with Barnabas and Paul, sometimes broken relationships are not reconciled. Paul does later write about Barnabas, although we hear nothing further about Barnabas at all after their separation. Some people think they did repair their relationship, but even if that's true it was never the same again, for they never did ministry together after this disagreement.

As followers of Christ we always aim for reconciliation, but it is not always possible, and it is vitally important to understand that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. Forgiveness is something I choose to do, reconciliation requires two people to make a choice. You can forgive and not be reconciled. I am a flawed, fallen, ordinary human being and I know this pain. And maybe you do too!

Second-choice world. Everything is broken!

But God ... but God is at work in the mess. There is a bigger picture.

Barnabas has a history of believing in people whom others might not! It was, we know, Barnabas who believed in a young persecutor turned believer called Saul, when others were suspicious of him. It was Barnabas who requested Saul to come and teach the believers in Antioch – the wrong sort of believers, remember? Barnabas wants John Mark (his cousin) to go with them on the trip to encourage churches. Paul wants to take Silas, not John Mark because John Mark left them, (some say quit on them) on an earlier trip.

Paul does not trust John Mark, so he refused to take him, but Barnabas felt strongly and believed in John Mark. And it may be that Barnabas was right to believe in him and his potential. Turns out that John Mark would write the Gospel we know as the Gospel according to Mark. That's the first Gospel written and the one that scholars say Mathew and Luke borrow heavily from!

God is at work in the mess.

You can read some more of the extraordinary things that Paul does in his continuing ministry in the rest of the book of Acts. You can read how he fearlessly preaches the Gospel in every way that he can. You can read how he is beaten, left for dead, shipwrecked yet saved, put in prison yet miraculously released. You can read too how he became arguably the greatest Christian theologian in human history. You can read his 13 letters to the early church, helping them understand the faith to which they had been called. We are still encouraged, challenged and helped by Paul's writing.

God at work in the mess.

There's an extraordinarily important and powerful principle at work here: flawed, fallen, ordinary human beings get it wrong sometimes, and sometimes get it badly wrong, but God works in the mess! Barnabas and Paul separated, never to work together again, but their ministry was not over because there is a bigger picture and God is at work in the mess.

Maybe in your second-choice world:

- maybe you have got something badly wrong..
- maybe you live in the pain of broken relationships..
- maybe you believe you have made too many mistakes...
- maybe you think God has given up on you and won't use you...

Here's the truth: Everything is broken, but God is at work in the mess.

Truth is, you are broken and so am I! And truth is, God does some of his best work in the mess of the broken lives of those whose hearts are turned towards him.

Barnabas, it turns out, is one of those people, one of those flawed, fallen, ordinary human beings whose heart was turned towards God. And in a world where everything is broken, Barnabas kept his eyes on the bigger picture – that one-day God himself will restore what is broken and redeem what is lost.

Friends, we would do well to follow the example of this man called Barnabas....and turn out hearts towards God and live in the truth of the bigger picture.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 17th November 2019, by Rev. Ian Phillips.