

Texts: Psalm 139:1-10; Acts 11:19-30

Sunday 24th November 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you managed to watch that film yet called, “The Way”? It stars Martin Sheen as the main character and it’s a moving, powerful story of one father who finds himself on a journey he never expected to take, and when on that journey, gains valuable companions that he never expected to find.

The theme for The Guild this year is ‘companions on the road’, companions we journey with. Our second reading today from the book of Acts is an account full of journeys and full of companions, and each of those journeys can teach us something important about what it means to be companions on the road.

It began with these words:

‘Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.’

(Acts 11:19-21)

There is much we could glean from these three verses but relevant for our theme this morning is that companions persevere together, indeed we need companions to persevere at all.

Here are a group of Christians who have had to flee Jerusalem because of the persecution that they faced. They travelled to different locations and finding a new life together in an unknown situation and future.

Yet amidst the unknown and the new, they persevere, in particular they persevere in their faith and in sharing their faith. These are ordinary Christians, there are no apostles within this group, there are no great leaders like Stephen who was martyred; these are just every day ordinary Christians, but they persevere. They have faith in the Lord Jesus and they know the mandate He has given to every Christian, to go make disciples of all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem but extending to the ends of the earth.

It is in persevering in their faith and in their calling that they see the favour of the Lord with a great number of people coming to faith, growing the church. This is akin to what we explored recently in Haggai – that fidelity to the Lord brings fruitfulness – but fidelity, as we explored last week, brings its own challenge, it can be difficult, and so to persevere we need companions.

I wonder who amongst us this morning needs to hear the call to persevere, but I also wonder who amongst us needs companions to draw alongside them that they might do so. Keep that in mind as we go through my other points this morning.

Because secondly, we find that this first journey of persecuted Christians **leads to further journeys,...**

in a domino-like effect. For now, the news of what the Lord is doing in Antioch, has journeyed by word of mouth to the church in Jerusalem and they in turn send Barnabas on his own journey back to Antioch. I suspect that the news which reached Jerusalem encouraged the church there, and in response they sent the man who's very name means 'son of encouragement' – Barnabas. **In these journeys we see that** companions on the road must encourage one another.

Firstly, we see encouragement through the sharing of good news, of what we see and hear going on as the Lord works amongst a community. I'm in the privileged position of hearing most of what happens in our congregation, but instead of me simply standing up here and talking at you for ten minutes,...

we've put together a video of some of our office bearers and what is encouraging them at this time.

[PLAY VIDEO – 13 MINUTES]

I wonder if you'll agree with me that there is so much going on here, so much good news, so much encouragement, and it's important to share this, because companions must encourage one another.

But we can encourage one another also through the **example of Barnabas. We are told in verse 23 that Barnabas did four things: he 'arrived'...he got close to what was happening; he 'saw'...he took time to draw alongside; he 'was glad'...he rejoiced in what was happening; and finally, he 'encouraged'...**

he urged them to remain strong in love of the Lord and in His purposes.

Companions on the road encourage one another by doing all these things, by getting close, by giving time, by rejoicing in the good and encouraging when it's hard. You've heard today a few of the encouraging things around our congregation, but you know, there are over **forty areas of ministry in our congregation, and some, if not all, of the people involved in these areas of service, need us to be like Barnabas: to get close, to give time (even just a few minutes), to rejoice where it is good and encourage where it is hard.**

To make this very practical, everyone should have a slip of paper, if you don't you can get one on the way out. If you have a slip of paper with an area of ministry that you are currently involved in, can you please swap it, just now, with someone near you so that you get a slip with an area of ministry that you are not involved in.

(PAUSE)

Now, the plan is, and hopefully you're all up for this, the plan is that beginning today and over the next four Sundays of Advent, you are to try and find five people who serve – not attend – five people who serve, in that area of ministry. So, I have XXX, and I have to find five people, beginning today, who are in that area of ministry. And what I want us to do, is find those five people, go up to them, either on a Sunday or during the week,...

and give them a few minutes to tell you about their area of ministry, let them tell you the good and the bad, and rejoice over the good and encourage them where it's hard. And if we all do this, then we will all be companions on the road who encourage together.

Now, when Barnabas had been there some time, responding to the good news and encouraging the believers, he came to realise that he needed help, he needed someone to partner with him in that area of ministry. Who knows why Saul came to mind, maybe it was of the Lord, maybe it was because Barnabas had had interactions with Saul several years before, but nevertheless he makes a journey, because he realised he needed a partner,...

he needed someone to partner with him in this ministry.

We might summarise this part of the account as companions on the road partner together.

What's incredible here is that the journey undertaken by Barnabas was around one hundred miles, one hundred miles to go get Saul. But equally astonishing is that Saul stepped up and journeyed back with Barnabas to Antioch, he too travelled one hundred miles, he travelled all that distance to partner together in this ministry.

You'll hopefully know that we have a vacancy list in this congregation, a vacancy list of ways we can all get involved to resource the forty plus areas of ministry within Brightons Parish Church. Some of these areas are crying out for help,...

and they are not one hundred miles away, they are literally less than one hundred feet away in some cases.

Our latest edition of Bright Lights, which will be out this week via your elders, contains an article on this issue, so please have a read over, then have a think about where you might give an hour, even every so often, to partner together as companions on the road. We do, literally, need everyone to play their part, to partner together here, because the opportunities and the needs around us are incredible.

Which leads us to our last portion from our reading in Acts, for in verses 29 to 30, we read of a final journey, a journey undertaken to meet the need of other people, people living hundreds of miles away. Yet despite the distance, the believers in Antioch realised...

they needed to be companions on the road, even to these people, many of whom they may not have known or seen. Now this was in a time and culture where the average person was so very poor. **Yet the believers** in Antioch realised that to be a companion required them to sacrifice together to help others.

Friends, whether it be the sacrifice of perseverance, or the sacrifice of encouragement, or the sacrifice of partnership through your giving of time or financial gifts, companions on the road sacrifice together. And when we sacrifice together, whether it be here in Brightons, or whether it be in support of The Guild projects through the lunch this afternoon, when we sacrifice together, then we embody the greatest companion of us all, **our God and heavenly Father.**

For when we sacrifice together, we show others in concrete ways that God is not dead or irrelevant, but that the Spirit of God is in this place, stirring up a people, who by perseverance, encouragement, partnership and sacrifice are making known the presence and reign of God, in this place and in places around the world, saying to one and all: we have not forgotten you and God has not forgotten you, for He is our greatest companion and we His people will be companions of the road with you as well.

Friends, my companions on the road, let us journey together in perseverance, encouragement, partnership and sacrifice. May it be so. Amen.