



Sunday, 19 November 2023
God's Community – Being an Encourager.

We're now at the last talk of our 'God's Community' series, and Darren gave this talk the title, "Being an encourager". He's also pointed us at a couple of short scriptures. But before we get into the nuts and bolts of those references, let me just check something - because otherwise I might be taking something for granted. So... What is encouragement?

I often find a dictionary is a good aid when studying the Bible. Mine tells me that "to encourage... is to put courage into a person and to inspire with confidence. It's to give fresh heart for something or to continue something, and to do this by expressing approval of plans or achievements. It can also mean to render assistance in the pursue of something or to promote, support or assist a way forward. Which also means that is can be some sort material aid. And finally, it can inspire and give confidence and hope for the future." So quite a lot there. And I hope you noticed all the active doing words involved in the processes listed.

So now let's look at Hebrew's 10:23-25 and I'll give you a moment to find it if you're using your own Bible. It's on page 1208 in the church Bible.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see 'the Day' approaching.

One thing most commentators agree about the NT book of Hebrews is that nobody can agree on an author - and even its recipients are a bit of a guess. But one thing most agree on is that its readers were followers of Jesus undergoing persecution and needed encouraging not to deviate from the truth they'd been taught or turn back from what they'd believed in. And in the excerpt we read the author is encouraging his (almost certainly a he) readers to be encouragers themselves. But encouraging what - and why?

Well let's start with the why - because that's a foundation for everything that follows this morning. First, it is because God Himself is faithful. In Malachi 3:6 God says, "I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." That was a statement to the Israelites when they where complaining about Him. In the NT we have many similar statements about God's reliability - and that He will not leave us alone either.

So if God is faithful to us, doesn't it seem reasonable - given all that He has done for our eternal well-being - to be willing to point ourselves in the same direction of being faithful to Him? And for our faithfulness - read obedience.

Some time back an author by the name of Charles Sheldon wrote a book with the line in it, 'What Would Jesus Do?'. Lots of Christians picked that up and ran with it, and many started to wear wristbands with the initials WWJD on them to remind themselves of this fundamental question. And sometimes when I'm faced with something, or someone, that I'm not sure how to react to, I find myself asking myself that same question. It's quite a good idea.



And the other reason is, "... *all the more* as you see 'the Day' approaching".

The 'Day of the Lord' is a big theme in the Bible, and I'm not even going to start scratching its surface here. Suffice to say it's shorthand for the time in the future when God will blow the final whistle on His fallen creation and say, "Time's up". It's both a day of judgement, and a day of final salvation. And yes, when the NT was being penned the Church in that day thought 'the Day' was just around the corner - hence the wording here. It's probably truer for most people in our non-persecuted part of Christendom today that we don't give much thought to it ever coming - and I suspect our faith suffers for that. But a reason for this writer's encouragement of these hard-pressed believers was that one day there will be a final score sheet - so press on until that end - because, truth is - we *are* on the winning side.

Some of you know I like watching international rugby. Sad about England in the recent world cup. But in 2015 I saw one of the greatest finishes you'll ever see in a rugby match. Japan were playing South Africa. And the South African Springbok's are as we know top team in the world. In contrast, Japan had lost their previous 18 world cup games. Japan, in those days, appeared to be what you might call, an also ran.

But four minutes into extra time Japan scored the winning try. The passion, the heart, in this team on that day radiated off them. They kept going to the very last, and in their case, beyond. Rugby hadn't been invented when the book of Hebrews was written - but the writer might have also used this match as an illustration of what he meant for keeping going to the end. Or as Paul said twice in his letter to Philippi, that he personally was pressing on for 'the prize of his high calling heavenward' - so also right to the end, which for Him, was in sight.

So having touched on the 'why' in these verses, let's now consider the 'what' and the 'how' of encouragement. But first, let's read the other verse Darren's pointed us to - Ephesians 4:29. And I'm going to quote it from the New Living Translation; "Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them". I used this translation because the word encouragement is used by the translator and appears in the text.

I'm assuming we've all been around long enough to be hurt by words. The old ditty from my schooldays, that "stick and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is a total lie! Words that hurt are a bit like being burnt. If the burn is not immediately dealt with, the damage keeps on and on burning its way inside. So Paul starts by saying, don't *you* be the source of someone else's long term damage

That's the negative side of words. But on the positive side, he says that we should intentionally use words that will, as another translation puts it, "build people up".

I worked through a period when giving staff affirmation was promoted as the 'in thing' management tool of the day. Trouble with that was, if the person giving the affirmation wasn't sincere - just doing it for effect - then the effect of the falsehood was totally cringe-worthy. But *I'm* talking about sincerity.



And because you can't speak in isolation, you need to be someone who is, as Galatians 5:22 says, filled with the Spirit, producing God's characteristics in all aspects of our lives. People hear our words as part of who we are, and even if they don't agree with us some of the time, they'll hear you through the amplifier of your personality. They'll hear what you say because of who you are. And that might not even be spoken words, but written stuff.

I've a few cards and a letter or two tucked away in odd corners at home that I've collected over the years. Not too many - just a few. They're from people who have given me affirmation, totally unsolicited, at some point in my life. Cards, letters, e-mails, even perhaps texts, can be vehicles you could use to bless someone with encouragement. The most letters from an individual we have in the Bible are from Paul - and written or dictated in some of them he's had to undertake some serious correction. But in most he'll take every opportunity to show affection and affirmation. So perhaps the question is, do we default to this methodology. And something else. I once saw, or maybe heard, someone say, "Tell them you love them *before* they're dead". Basically, don't miss the opportunity.

But encouragement doesn't have to only be by words. They say actions speak louder than words. And I know that's been so in this Fellowship where meals have turned up for different people at various times of need and difficulty. Providing transport as well - and that might mean putting yourself out and others interests before your own. And that's also a Biblical instruction. It's basically meeting someone at their point of need and getting alongside them with a helping hand that says, "I'm here for you".

So it's coming towards the end of the 2017 London Marathon. There's just 200 metres to go, but one athlete is totally done in.

He's the guy in black, who's legs have gone to jelly. But another athlete, a total stranger, gives up his place in the race, grabs him, and helps him over the line. When I talk about some self-giving, costly encouragement, this seems a good illustration of it don't you think? Do *you* think David, the guy in black, felt blessed by Matthew, the guy in white's intervention in his situation, even as he perhaps felt bad about not coping at the time?

Sticking with athletics for a moment, I've another story of practical encouragement, done on the quiet and out of the limelight. We all of course know the name Mo Farah, or I should say, Sir Mo Farah. And you probably know the credit he's given to his PE teacher at his school who encouraged his running career. But a while ago I was helping kids do reading in a school, and one of the books they were reading was of the early life of Mo Farah. And I found out from that book what when he had to travel a long way to train early on in his career, Paula Radcliffe paid for his driving lessons, or she paid for his first car, I can't now remember which. So do you think her generosity would have been an encouragement to Mo? I think so.

What I'm saying is that encouragement comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes we might not see it as encouragement, just practical help. It's that as well - and in the Bible James castigates those who only seek to support with words and not actions. So James is very much in the business of pushing practical discipleship.



Which is why James 2:15-17 says this:

'Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.' If the phrase was around in Greek in James' day, the translation into English might be something like, "Put your money where your mouth is.". And just in case you were here a fortnight ago and heard what Darren was teaching - no - I haven't cribbed his notes. I had this all prepared by and large before he said similar things.

But it means if you thought before this morning that encouragement was just about what you said, I hope I've torpedoed that notion. Yes, of course it has lots to do with the words we use, and the way we say them as well. They are very important. But don't let it stop there. I've known someone who's been totally stressed out, and all my supportive words would have fallen on deaf ears if I hadn't *also* been able to give the practical help they then needed.

But whatever sort of encouragement is given, it's got to start with motivation. A will, and willingness, to bless someone else with encouragement. And there's a guy in the Bible who must have had that in spades. Barnabas.

When we think of named names in the NT, Barnabas is probably not one of the first people you think of. That's just a bit surprising as his name crops up 28 times in Acts, and five times in Paul's letters, and we have enough detail to learn quite a lot about him - and also quite a lot from him.

And the first thing we learn is that Barnabas wasn't his real name! Luke tells us in Acts 4 that his name was Joseph, that he was a Jew, a Levite in fact and that he came from Cyprus. But if his name's Joseph, why is he never called Joseph but referred to as Barnabas for the rest of Acts and also in Paul's letters? Well it's because Barnabas was his 'nickname'.

But how did a man named Joseph get to be known as Barnabas, and what does this name mean? Well Acts 4:36 tells us it was the apostles (the church leaders of his day in Jerusalem) who called him Barnabas - and that the name means 'Son of Encouragement'. Luke doesn't tell us why they called him 'Son of Encouragement', but reading between the lines we assume it was because that was exactly the way they saw that he was.

I've talked about Barnabas a few times in the past, and I've often asked the question, "If someone gave *you* a nickname based on your character, I wonder what it would be?". And then... I've sometimes felt like threatening to ask what nickname the person next to you would give you right now!

But while we don't know the background to why the church in Jerusalem gave Barnabas this name, there are a couple of events in the record of his life that point to his encouraging nature. So let's briefly look at them. The first concerns his encouragement of Paul not long after Paul's conversion. After his conversion Paul spent a little time in Damascus until some of the locals started planning on killing him, at which point he went back to his home town of Tarsus. But there was now a serious need for a good Bible teacher at Antioch where the



church had broken out of the constraint of its Jewish roots and had become internationalised. (And you'll know still is, if you were here last Sunday morning!) But the leadership in Jerusalem heard about this and wondered what was going on, so they sent Barnabas as someone they could trust to the church in Antioch to find out. He did that, and also, the Bible tells us, encouraged the church there. And later still he was to become one of this church's prophet-teachers.

But Barnabas sees the need in Antioch of another good Bible teacher, and goes off to Tarsus searching for Paul - finds him - and encourages him to come back with him to Antioch to work in teaching truth to the church there.

And there's something worth noting here. Up to Acts 13:42 Barnabas' name *always* comes first when Paul and Barnabas are mentioned together. But afterwards - you'll find Paul's first. And that's *not* insignificant. You see Barnabas was Paul's senior - something that doesn't often register with our knowledge of Paul's later life. Barnabas was in effect both training and encouraging Paul - until Paul - with his obvious gifts - began to outshine (and also out suffer) his mentor. In business people don't usually like training up someone who looks likely to take over their role. But in the church it's what we're called to do! Jesus said at the end of Matthew Ch.28, "... go and make *disciples* of all nations..." - not just converts - but disciples - followers - and followers need training. So perhaps a question for us today is - if you're a Christian - who are you not only encouraging in their role and ministry in the church - but also helping to train - maybe to even outstrip you in their service in the future?

My second example of encouragement from Barnabas also involves Paul, but it's a totally different story, and it involves Paul and Barnabas having a flaming great row and ending up going their separate ways. And it all because of a young man named John Mark.

Let me tell you about it straight from the Bible as it's recorded in Acts 15. > Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas..." and the story goes on. They had a proper row. And the Bible doesn't gloss over it - or its consequences. *Not* very encouraging you might think - but hear me out.

I sometimes ask the question in relation to this incident - 'Who was right - Paul or Barnabas?'. Me - I think... they were *both* right - but in different ways - because they were seeing the same situation from different angles.

Paul was operating here a bit like I do sometimes. He was being 'task driven'. Tell him something needs doing - and he's planning the way to do it before you've finished speaking. But Barnabas - well he was far more 'person centred'. So while Paul was focussed on the hard graft that would be involved in a return visit to the churches and saw John Mark as a liability not as an asset - Barnabas - equally aware of course of the work ahead - saw this was 'a second chance', and more experience that would develop this lad into a useful team player. Basically, he wanted to



encourage him. And just in passing - let *us* thank God for all those who've given *us* 'second chances' in the past - including of course - primarily - God Himself.

I said earlier they were both 'right', but if you pushed me, I'd go with Barnabas rather than Paul. *And Paul* would probably agree with me - because as time goes by He becomes reconciled with John Mark (and we have to assume, Barnabas). How do we know? Well, Paul mentions Mark positively and with affection at the end of three of his letters. In fact - in 2 Timothy 4:11 he asks Timothy to - "get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." Now that's a real U-turn! But it does show that Paul was big enough to change his mind - although it's not Paul we're looking at today. It's Barnabas' encouragement of an unlikely helper who, because of his positive response to him, turned out to be labelled 'helpful' by Paul himself. I'm sure Mark could look back with gratitude later on to Barnabas' support - just like many of us can feel thankful for various people who saw something in us worth encouraging when there wasn't much to go on at the time.

So a somewhat dyslexic boy called Granville Richards can look back with gratitude to two master at Queensmead School, just down the road, back in the late fifties in the same way. Only much later on did I find out they'd worked behind the scenes to facilitate a better direction for my education.

But who will look back to you in their later life remembering something you've said or have done as a significant moment of encouragement on their life's journey. Not that that's what your aiming for of course. But hopefully it will be a byproduct of the way we live in the now? Or as Ralph Waldo Emerson is reported to have said: "I shall pass this way but once; any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

But there's something else I need to address to be true to those verses in Hebrews we've read. Sometimes after I've read a Bible passage I've look up a commentary or read some Bible notes about the passage only to be disappointed because their author has ignored a detail in the verses I was interested in. I don't want to be guilty of doing the same thing today. So going back to those verses in Hebrews we read [PP11] they say "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another..."

Now why do you think gathering together as an assembly of Christians is linked to encouraging each other?

I thought of a couple of reasons, one explicit in the text, the other more an inference. The explicit one is that you really can't encourage someone if your not in touch with them, particularly in person. It's in meeting together we can better get to know each other, hear need, and pray with each other. And it's in the shared experience that we grow in our faith. Because assembling together is both hospital and classroom for the body of Christ.

When I was much younger an illustration often used was of an open coal fire, with all its lumps of coal in it all glowing red. But take one out and put it on the hearth, and



not long afterwards it will have cooled down to merely a dull black isolated lump. OK - so today very few people have open coal fires, but I'm sure the point of the illustration isn't lost on you. We help as the body of Christ to keep each other on fire for God, and we are supposed to.

The other reason I see that's not explicit is that just seeing each other gathered together on, well in our case, a Sunday, is encouragement in itself. Call it fellowship if you want to. But your presence is an encouragement to me (and not just because I speaking!) And I trust that when I'm around just being here in some way encourages you too. Which is why I miss people like Ken & Nina not being here, remembering their years of service, fellowship and generous hospitality. Stan & Margaret as well. Do you miss them? We are after all God's family. Jesus said so - also we're called Jesus friends. And friends usually try to meet up.

I'm almost done - but just one more thought. I've talked about encouragement today in a framework of what we say or do - but you might also be able to be an encouragement to someone by doing nothing. Well not quite nothing, but just being with them and listening to them.

I once talked to someone who'd been lined up to shake hands with our late Her Majesty the Queen. The thing that struck him was that while she was with him, she was wholly and undividedly 'with him'. He had her full attention. The contrast to that is of course talking to somebody and being conscious they are looking over your shoulder wanting to be somewhere else, doing something else, and not really listening to you at all.

A good listener is worth their weight in gold in the encouragement bag of tools of a church fellowship. And you can even be a housebound person and still do that very well with today's technology. And sometimes being a good listener takes discipline - both in the putting yourself out and in the concentration. Because it's all about the *other* person - not you.

I've finished. A moment's quiet.

Let's close by singing Songs of Fellowship, no. 54 - Brother, sister, let me serve you.

Granville Richards