

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022

For seven and a half years, Rab C Nesbitt was a neighbour of mine! Well, it was actually his real persona, the actor Gregor Fisher, who stayed with his parents in the little cottage opposite the Manse driveway in the village of Neilston, my first parish. And even in those early days of his career long ago, Gregor was quite a character. He would appear in the Church half way through the Christmas Eve Service, fresh from appearing in the Pantomime at the King's Theatre in Glasgow, and, from time to time, I asked myself if he was watching my mannerisms to pass them on to Ricky Fulton for his portrayal of the Revd I M Jolly!

Gregor's mother, Mrs Leckie, was a great stalwart of the Church. Each Sunday she would be last to come in just as the bell had stopped ringing, and the Beadle, John Wilson, would come in to the Vestry and announce, "Ye can start noo! Mrs Leckie's here!"

And no sooner had I started my sermon each Sunday than Mrs Leckie would fall fast asleep. She rose early every morning to feed the chickens and the geese that they kept in their garden, and in her coat and hat, the warmth of the Church precipitated her slumbers.

At the close of the service I would go to the Kirk gates to greet the congregation as they left, and Mrs Leckie was always last out. Without fail, each week, she would come up to me, shake me vigorously by the hand and say, "Mr Aitken, that was a lovely service!"

One particular summer Sunday anything that could go wrong, did go wrong. The organist played more than a few wrong notes; the reader read the wrong Scripture passages and I even bored myself with the length and the content of my peroration!

When worship was over, I thought to myself, "Well, if Mrs Leckie, says that was a lovely service, she is lying through her teeth!"

So I greeted my folk as they left in the sunshine, no doubt glad that the ordeal was over for another week, and then I saw her out of the corner of my eye. She came up to me with her warm smile, shook me by the hand and said, "Mr Aitken, weren't the flowers lovely today?"

Dear Cissie, always looking to encourage, to praise, to give a word of cheer in every situation!

Several mornings in the week, when I was sitting at my Study desk, I would see her leaving the house with a large wicker basket over her arm, the contents covered in a crisp linen tea towel – she had been up with the lark to bake soda scones and tattie scones and cheese scones and that was her off to distribute them to some of the "old folk" of the village, most of whom were younger than she was!

Then there was Jessie. Dear Jessie MacKinnon. Jessie had been widowed young and she had made a great job of bringing up her family in spite of straitened circumstances. And like

Cissie, you could count on Jessie being in her pew come rain or shine each time the Kirk doors were opened for worship. Jessie had dreadful asthma but it never let her get her down, and whenever I said something in a sermon or a prayer that had helped her, the following week I would receive a hand written letter to thank me.

Anyhow, Jessie was not rich in the world's goods, yet she performed a wonderful ministry that meant so much to so many. Every week, after she had collected her pension at the Post Office, she would go into Stewart's Newsagents further along the Main Street, and she would purchase a selection of cards that she would send to folk in all sorts of situations. When sadness had knocked on the door or someone's home, Jessie would send a card expressing her sorrow and sympathy; when a new baby brought so much joy and hope into the life of a young family, Jessie chose a card to express her happiness at the news; when someone was ill in hospital or at home, a card was carefully chosen with the right words to let the patient know that they were in Jessie's thoughts and prayers.

Jessie must have spent a small fortune in cards down the years, yet that Ministry of hers brought untold good to all those who received them. I still have some of her letters from 40 years ago in one of my Memory boxes!

Since my unfortunate accident at the beginning of December, when my fall on Glasgow's Buchanan Street resulted in a broken fibia/tibula in my left leg, and a three-hour operation to put a titanium pin in the fracture, I have been at the receiving end of so much encouragement and support. So many family, friends and members of St Nicholas Church have touched me by their great kindnesses – the prayers, the gifts of produce, home baking, sweets, cards, letters and flowers have been so touching and so generous, and they have been so much part of the prolonged healing process. I owe each of them an incalculable debt.

In the Book of The Acts of the Apostles, we are introduced to a man called Joseph, but we tend not to remember him for his real name, but for his nickname, Barnabas. Barnabas actually means "son of encouragement." And when we read his story, we see that he was given this nickname quite simply because he possessed the natural ability to encourage others – he encouraged the Church in Jerusalem by selling his property and giving the proceeds to the Apostles for use in the spreading of the Gospel; he encouraged the Gentile converts in the city of Antioch by ministering to them despite his Jewish heritage.

Again and again in the story, it appears that Barnabas encouraged the early church by filling whatever rôle the church needed him to fill.

As the Church today passes through such uncharted stormy waters, we desperately need encouragers. All around us there exists a world of put downs and pessimism. So we need more folk who will build others up, bring their enthusiasm, and battle negativity with positivity.

We need more folk like Barnabas.

Perhaps you yourself are in need of some encouragement? Maybe current events, relationship stresses or financial pressures have piled up and you are in desperate need of some hope. If that is your situation, I pray that someone will come and be your Barnabas and lift you up and give you back a sense of purpose, a feeling of wellbeing.

I think that in the Church we underrate encouragement as a Christian virtue. Yet, what an enormous difference it made in the lives that Barnabas touched.

What an enormous difference you could make in folks' lives if you went out of your way to encourage, to affirm, to give value.

Friends, all around us are people who spend their time putting others down.

People need lifting, encouraging, consoling.

Barnabas never wrote a book of the Bible, but much of our New Testament would not exist without the encouragement that he gave to St Paul at a difficult time he was enduring.

The Book of Acts describes Barnabas, saying, "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."

Would that each of us could be described in those words!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister