

Septuagesima 2018: St Barnabas

'I do not run aimlessly'...

Sometimes, it seems to me, my dog Bairstow runs aimlessly...round and round furiously in circles. The lawn outside the church here, even the choir vestry, I have to confess, are favourite places for this. But take him to the Vicarage front door, release him, and he will run helter skelter for the kitchen, after the prize of crumbs, or something better, falling from the Beswicks' table...or for the warmth of the Aga. Or let him off the lead the far side of the river across Port Meadow, and the rabbits speed for the shelter of their burrows as he disappears into the thickets in wholehearted pursuit. In today's Epistle, we find St Paul writing to the Corinthians about having an aim in their Christian lives; this, obviously, is not to catch a rabbit or find a warm bed, but...to receive an imperishable wreath...a victor's laurel crown. And this aim, this goal, this purpose, is what they must hold onto with every fibre of their being. So what is this imperishable wreath? In the short passage we heard this morning, we're not told. But this first letter to the Corinthians opens up with Paul reminding them that he preaches Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God; God, he says at the end of ch. 1, is the source of our life in Christ. And the hymn 'Fight the good fight', based firmly on the writings of St Paul, expresses the corollary of this very clearly: 'Christ is the path, and Christ the prize: lay hold on life and it shall be thy joy and crown eternally. Run the straight race through God's good grace, lift up thine eyes and seek his face'. This Septuagesima Sunday, the first of the three which encourages us to prepare ourselves for another Lent, is a great opportunity, thanks to this Pauline text, to remind ourselves of our goal...to let Christ, in the fullness of his sacrificial love, to be fully formed in us: and...to remind ourselves that we shall not achieve that goal if our movement towards it is aimless, without a sense of purpose...if we keep getting distracted from the scent.

But then we do live in a distracting world; we tend to be anxious and concerned about many things. How are we to run the race, seek the prize, with a sense of purpose? Maybe it helps first to recall from time to time that God has a purpose for *us*. The opening of the book of Genesis tells us straightforwardly that it is the word of God...the 'let-it-be' of God, which has creative force. And not just in the wonder of creation in its vastness, but in the particularity of His purpose for you and me. 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you', is God's word to Jeremiah. Or think of that wonderful Psalm, 139: 'Thine eyes did see my substance yet being unperfect, and in thy book were all my members written...which day by day were fashioned, when as yet there were none of them'. God with His will for each of us goes before. Let us hold to that, meditate upon that...and then turn to the disciplines of our own purpose. The ways of avoiding aimlessness are likely to be different for each one of us. St Francis de Sales, whose feast day was last Wednesday, reminds us in his 'Introduction to the devout life' how foolish it is to suppose that patterns of prayer, the disciplines of a life directed towards Christ, will be the same for everyone. That's why it is so helpful for a Christian to find a guide, a friend, a companion to accompany them: why a time of retreat can be so beneficial. But if nothing else...the sign of the Cross at the beginning and the end of every day: *there* is an aim: to take into ourselves, our hearts, the pattern of the Cross of Jesus who gave himself. Some distinct times of stillness; to be still and sense the presence of God. Some inward digestion of simple words such as the Jesus prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me. Some knocking on God's door: 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief'. Then perhaps, if our pattern of life allows it, an intention to come to Mass on one weekday each week: to follow the simple form of the Morning

and/or Evening office which is provided here. And a prayerful intention to make these things our aim particularly as Lent begins in just over two weeks time. The length of time we might spend in silence: the words we choose as a mantra: what we call out to God in personal prayer: what we can realistically manage in private devotion or public prayer: all these may vary from person to person. But wouldn't it be wonderful this coming Lent if we were to support one other in the recognition that God has a purpose for each of us, and for his church in this place: and that He is calling us to respond, not in aimless gyration, but in a purposeful journey towards the prize of Christ: Christ formed in you and me, and in His body, the Church.