



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Feast of Saint Barnabas (11th June) 2026

There is a narrative of the earliest generations of early Christianity that it was a movement of the poor and socially inconsequential. However, in the Epistle today, we encounter in the list of people at the Church in Antioch one, "Man'a-en a member of the court of Herod the Tetrarch." The Greek word used to describe Man'a-en is σύντροφος. It is a word which connotes rather more than the English rendering here: in fact, it describes a long-standing and close friend; so this man was someone of power and influence in the court of Herod. What is more, this was not some discreet adherent or benefactor, but a teacher at the Church in Antioch: in other words, a very visible member of the Christian community.

He is not alone. In a list of those who associated with the incarnate Christ, Saint Luke lists Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward; and, of course, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is addressed to the, "Most excellent Theophilus," who was also likely a man of significance. Dotted through the subsequent text are references to others, who had some means, such as Lydia, who made a good living from the purple-dye trade. In many ways, this inclusion of what might have been considered the great and the good reached its apogee in the Empress Helena, who was almost certainly instrumental in her son Constantine's accommodation with the Church in the early fourth century.

Any suggestion, therefore, that Christianity emerged as a sort of self-help group for the disadvantaged is misconceived. From the outset, the Church was comprised by a cross-section of society; and one where social distinctions were set at nought as people gathered as equals around the Eucharistic table and there was an expectation that those of greater means would support those who struggled financially. It might not always have been easy to hold the line: Saint Paul's critique of the Church in Corinth and the somewhat dysfunctional Eucharistic practice there suggests that things sometimes went wrong; but, all the same, the intended ethos was clear.

Saint Barnabas, whose memory we perpetuate today, reflects this more accurate conception of the early Church. He had been a man of some means, owning land, which he had sold to donate the proceeds to the Church. From that time onwards, he seems to have devoted himself to promoting the mission of the Church and was sent to Antioch to oversee the developing Church there.

Of course, the societal context in which Christian communities of today are set is very different from that of Saint Barnabas's day and an incarnational Church adjust its earthly engagement to reflect these changing times. However, the principles behind our practices remain constant: among them, in this connexion, is our understanding of the ownership of wealth.

As Pope Leo has recently reasserted in his recent encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, human ownership of property and wealth is never absolute. Whatever temporal regulation might suggest, ultimately, we hold all our wealth in trust. In other words, we are the stewards of the property, which earthly designates as belonging to us. Our assets - such as they might be - are at the service of Christ's mission in the world; and divine Law might, on occasion, override the discretion, which earthly law suggests we enjoy over our property.

The implications of this injunction often involve a complex balancing of arguments and other principles; but this does not mean that we can simply set it aside as we contemplate how we use what the world tells us is ours.