

Readings: Acts 9: 26 – 31; Psalm 21 (22):25 – 27, 30 – 32; 1 John 3:18 – 24; John 15: 1 – 8.

In today's reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* we jump forward from the previous Sundays and move into the second stage of Luke's narrative. In the first stage he has told us about the witness to the resurrection of Jesus by the original apostles and their immediate followers and helpers in Jerusalem. This first stage ended with the martyrdom of Stephen, which led to a great persecution and the dispersal of most members of the church. This dispersal provided the opportunity for a wider preaching of the gospel, particularly in Samaria – thus fulfilling the Lord's command before the Ascension (Acts 1: 8).

The second stage is dominated by two major events – the conversion of Paul (in chapter 9) and Peter's baptism of the Gentile centurion, Cornelius, (in chapter 10). Today's reading comes between these two events, and it links Paul's conversion with his mission to the Gentile world, which will be the theme of the third section of Luke's narrative.

Two or three years have passed since the Jewish persecutor Saul was confronted on the Damascus road by the risen Jesus, and became Paul, the Christian disciple. He has been preaching in the Damascus synagogues, saying that Jesus *is the Son of God*, and this has – not for the last time – aroused Jewish hostility. His fellow disciples have helped him to escape, and now we find him making his way to Jerusalem, which is still the centre of the Church's mission. For the third time Luke tells us of the response of members of the Church to the arrival of Paul when he *tried to join the disciples*. Here was the great persecutor, so, unsurprisingly, *they were all afraid of him: they could not believe he was really a disciple*.

At this point Luke brings back into the story a disciple he has mentioned before (Acts 4:36 & 37) – a Cypriot called Joseph, to whom the apostles had given the name Barnabas, *which means 'Son of Encouragement'*. In today's reading he justifies this title by being the one who introduces Paul to the apostles, telling them of his conversion his work in Damascus. He will continue this work of *encouragement* by calling Paul to join him in preaching the gospel in Antioch (Acts 11: 25).

So Barnabas plays an important part in the growth of the Church.

Pray that we may follow his example by encouraging new believers and working with them.