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I was on some study leave last week and led a conference in Brisbane. On the flight to Brisbane, I sat in an aisle seat, and an elderly lady sat in a window seat in my row. And no one sat in the middle. Before the flight took off, the lady sitting in the window seat took a small picture of a child-shaped out of her bag, and put it in the middle seat.

[Picture #1]



I thought, 'What's going on?' When I saw the picture, she smiled and explained what it was. It was Finlay's school project, a 6 year old boy living in Edinburgh, Scotland. The child-shaped picture was Finlay, and it was like he would travel from Melbourne to Brisbane and record the distance between the two cities. I could now understand the picture. Due to the lady's sharing, the boy entered into my world for just a short period, and furthermore it made me remember my childhood.

4 or 5 months before I went to primary school, my grandma gifted me a nice school bag. I liked it and carried the bag over my shoulders every day imagining my school days. I had forgotten about it for a long time, but the lady's sharing of Finlay's school project brought back my memory.

This is the power of sharing. Sharing is like scattering seeds, and no one knows what will happen when the seeds planted in somebody's heart. Sharing the good news is the same. No matter how simply or briefly we share our experience or stories regarding the Gospel, our sharing could make huge differences in others' lives. This is the reason Jesus called us to the ministry of witness.

In John 20, today's Gospel reading, Jesus was resurrected and appeared to his disciples. At that time they were together locking the doors with the fear of the Jewish authorities. Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After giving them his peace twice, he commissioned them saying, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

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Acts 4, another of today’s Bible readings, showed that the disciples had followed well the Lord’s invitation, and created a powerful faith community based on passionate testimony. Verses 33-34 say, “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all.”

What’s remarkable is that their testimony made a sharing community in which not only the good news but also foods and possessions were shared willingly. Verse 32 says, “No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.” This was the life of the early churches. Testimony and sharing were the essential two acts building a Christian community.

These two acts are still indispensable in illustrating the vibrant church in Christ Jesus. Testimony without sharing or sharing without testimony is not enough. The balance in those two acts is critical in restoring the inner vitality of the church, and bearing spiritual fruits. However, in this post-modern world in which the truth is relativised and becomes subjective, testimony tends to be underestimated or ignored even in the church, especially in western context.

A person appears in the very next verse of today’s Bible passage in Acts 4. The man’s life remarkably shows why we Christians should balance those two acts; he was Barnabas. Verse 36 introduces the person as follows: “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostle called Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement.’)”

Barnabas was his nickname, and his original name was Joseph. The meaning of his nickname is very interesting; it contains the dynamic interaction between the acts of testimony and sharing.

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*Barnabas* originally came from the Hebrew language; *bar* means ‘son’ and *nabas* came from a noun *nabi* that means ‘prophet.’ That is, *Barnabas* signifies ‘son of prophet.’ Then, why did the Apostle Luke interpreted its meaning as ‘son of encouragement’?

In Greek the word meaning prophecy is *propemisis* which means bringing something to light by saying it before in place or time. The Apostle Paul illustrates the results of right or true prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:3 as follows:

“The one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging, and comfort.”

Likewise, encouragement or consolation is a fruit of right prophecy, so Luke paraphrased the meaning of *Barnabas*, son of prophet, into ‘son of encouragement.’ At this, the Greek word translated into encouragement is *paraklesis*, today’s sermon title, which describes the act of calling people closer together, into closer intimacy and stronger comfort.

The meaning of his nickname informs us who he was; Joseph, called *Barnabas*, was a real prophet encouraging and comforting people. He did not only testify the good news but also by sharing what he had with people in need. For example, Acts 4:37 says, “He sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”

The balance between testimony and sharing in Barnabas’ life made him an amazing channel of God’s grace. Above all, he became a great mentor raising many leaders. Representatively, he had helped Paul to serve the early churches.

You know, Paul was a notorious anti-Christian activist named Saul. He was a leader in wanting to kill Stephen, one of seven deacons appointed for the ministry of food distribution. On the way to Damascus to arrest Christians there, Saul heard Jesus’ voice and was transformed to be a Christian.

However, no one in the early church community trusted Saul except for Barnabas. Barnabas advocated Saul before the church people. Furthermore, he brought Saul to Antioch and invited him into the leadership team in the local church. Thanks to Barnabas’ support and encouragement, Saul could become the Apostle Paul.

Mark was also nurtured by Barnabas. He was one of the staff in the mission team to Cyprus led by Barnabas and Paul. But he gave up his duty and left the team half-way. In the preparation for the next mission trip, there was a sharp disagreement between Barnabas and Paul regarding taking Mark with them. Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance, but Paul did not think it wise as Mark had deserted them before.

In the end, Barnabas and Paul parted; Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas and went to Syria. You know what? Afterwards, Mark wrote the first book of the Gospel, and set a foundation for the three other books of the Gospel. Barnabas’ encouragement and comfort changed Mark and helped him grow to be a passionate and important leader of the church.

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Through the life of Barnabas, we can see the power of encouragement, *paraklesis*. *Paraklesis*, the act of calling people into closer intimacy and stronger comfort, not criticism or blame, can change people.

Look at the life of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Miserables*. Valjean had to live in a prison for 19 years just because of stealing a piece of bread. Even being released from prison, he had to carry a yellow passport indicating he was a criminal.

No one gave him a place to work or stay; no one trusted or had mercy on him. Then, Bishop Myriel invited him into his manse, served him a warm meal and provided a place to sleep. Valjean was not accustomed to that treatment, and betrayed the Bishop’s hospitality and stole silver plates to survive. But, he was arrested soon and surprisingly got his forgiveness and comfort in Jesus’ love.

This was the time when his life was totally changed. Valjean was another example revealing the power of *paraklesis*, encouragement. *Paraklesis* is not just sharing or helping. It is a fruit of prophecy; it is a result of right testimony.

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Sisters and brothers,

The church as the body of Christ should be the space of *paraklesis* in which testimony to Jesus' resurrection and sharing of what we have occur willingly and freely. The word *paraklesis* is directly connected to a verb *parakaleo* which means to implore someone to come to one's side to support. Yes, the ministry of *paraklesis* is not passive; it is not waiting for someone's call, but goes out beyond the church and sees what we can do, what we should do. Amen.