

Where To From Here?

A sermon on Isaiah 43:16-21 & Philippians 3:4-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 April 2022

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Message

When God is doing new things, our familiar signposts are no longer helpful, and our capacity to follow is dependent on our living relationship with Jesus.

Sermon

You've probably heard the old story about the bloke who was travelling through rural Victoria in the days before GPS and SatNav systems, and he was a little bit lost. Not really lost; he knew where he was, but he wasn't sure how to get to where he was going. So in the next town he pulled up in the main street and saw an old local in the street and asked, "How do I get to Quambatook from here?" And the old local looked at him, and scratched his beard for a minute and then said, "Quambatook, eh? I wouldn't start from here."

Now if you are trying to get to Quambatook, or Moorabbin or somewhere, then one way of doing it is to follow someone who knows the way there. But there is a significant risk in that method. Maybe you've had this experience. You're following someone who knows the way, and then something goes wrong and you lose them at the lights or something, and then you realise that you're in a real mess because while you were focussed on following, you didn't need to keep track of where you'd been, and now you've lost them and you've got absolutely no idea where you are or where to go next. Following is not always as easy as it sounds.

If we are committed to following Jesus, and that's what most of us pledged ourselves to do for the rest of our lives when we were baptised, then it is obviously pretty important to know where he is, where he is going, and what he is doing. Like, if I told you to spend the day tomorrow following Shelley around, so you headed up to Horsham, only to find that she'd driven down to Melbourne yesterday and will be down here for the week, then you'd be off to a pretty bad start. If you didn't even know where Shelley was, let alone where she might be going next, then your following of Shelley is going to come up short pretty quickly, isn't it?

Now following Jesus doesn't usually involve driving up and down the Western Highway like following Shelley would, but it still requires us to be able to stay up to date with where Jesus is and what he's doing. At other times we might talk instead about needing to be able to tell where the Spirit is moving in order to be able to go with the Spirit. In most cases, those ideas are expressing much the same thing.

So the bit of Christian jargon that comes up here is the word "discernment" which basically means being able to spot the signs that show us where Jesus is and what he's up to, or which way the Spirit of Jesus is moving at any given time. As followers of Jesus, discernment is something we are involved in all the time, but in this season of Lent, it comes up as one of those spiritual practices that we try to work on a bit harder and get better at.

So this evening, I want to pick up an idea that came up in at least two of our Bible readings that speaks of an important aspect of discernment, in fact of one of the difficulties of discernment, and I want to relate them directly to something that I've been giving rather a lot of time to lately, and that is the proposed constitutional changes for our Baptist Union. My point may seem a bit discouraging, because it illustrates how difficult good discernment is, but

I hope it will be helpful, because owning up to those difficulties is actually an important part of learning to deal with them and follow Jesus despite them.

A word about the Baptist Union situation first, and then a look at what our Bible readings might be saying to us in this context.

The Baptist Union of Victoria has announced that it is seeking to make some changes to its constitution, and to some of the policies that go with it. The changes roughly fit into three main groups. The first group is what you might call routine maintenance. There are some new sections that need to be inserted because some national laws have changed with regard to not-for-profit organisations like churches, and we need to change some things in order to comply with those rules. And while we're at it, there's a few other little tweaks and updates that we might as well do at the same time. Nothing much controversial about that group.

The second group is some changes that emerge from a project undertaken over the last few years to work out how we should deal with churches that have dwindled and died but are reluctant to admit it and close the doors. Now there are some parts of the proposed solution that I don't like, and in particular one which I think causes a conflict of interest for the Baptist Union Council and should be changed, but I recognise that these proposals have been under discussion for several years and they are attempting to deal with a genuine problem.

The third group has come as a surprise, and at a consultation last Thursday night, it was admitted that there has been no prior consultation about these ones. The general idea behind them is to ensure that Baptist churches have an ongoing commitment to being just that – Baptist churches. And I support that idea in principle. It is just that I do have some established expertise in Baptist identity and Baptist theology, and it appears to me that the same cannot be said for the people who put together this proposal about ongoing commitment to being Baptist churches. Instead, it appears to me that several key aspects of the document are fundamentally unBaptist, and that its adoption would, in significant ways, make us much less Baptist.

Let me make it clear that I don't think there is anything deliberate or malicious about this. The people involved are people I know and trust. They are good people with good intentions, but in this case it appears to me that they were so oblivious to the issues of Baptist identity that they failed to consult both their churches and the experts on Baptist history and practice who could have alerted them to the flaws in their proposals.

The issues involved are big enough that for the first time in all my years as a Baptist pastor, I'm wondering whether if this went through I might be wanting to talk about whether we should withdraw from membership of the Union. And I know quite a few other pastors who are asking the same question.

It is strange, because I've seen some pretty big fights over some pretty high profile issues over the decades, but here we are with something that many if not most of our churches haven't even noticed, and this is the first one I've really thought might split the Union.

So then I come to tonight's Bible readings, and I hear God saying through the prophet Isaiah, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

And I hear the Apostle Paul saying, “this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Now you can perhaps imagine how those lines sound to me at the moment. God says, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Can you see it coming? Can you smell it like approaching rain?

This is the discernment question. Can you sense what’s happening, where the Spirit of God is moving, which direction the footsteps of the risen Jesus are taking us? So for me right at the moment, that can easily sound like it confirms what I’m thinking. Perhaps it is time for something new. Perhaps the Union that has served us well has served its time and needs to be left behind. I’m doing something new now, says the Lord, can you sense it coming.

Maybe the Baptist Union is now one of those things which the Apostle Paul describes as lying behind us and needing to be forgotten as we press on towards the goal of the new things that God is doing. You can see how easily these lines can be heard as reinforcing just what I’ve been wondering. Thus says the Lord, and all that.

But I’ve got to be honest with you and urge you to be sceptical of any preachers who try to make out that it is all that easy. Because look what happens if I try to stand in the shoes of the current Baptist Union leadership and listen to these same verses from their perspective.

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Sure Nathan, you have some expertise in the way our Baptist forebears thought and the sorts of things they held to be important, but do not cling on to the former things, or stay bogged down in the ways of the past. God is doing a new thing here, and sure, it might be at odds with what some Baptists of the past thought, but new things are like that. They’re new. God is doing a new thing here, can you not perceive it? Forget what lies behind, and strain forward to what lies ahead, the new thing that God is doing in the Baptist Union.

If I’m honest about it, I know that neither of these perspectives on how God might be speaking through these passages into these current events is any more obviously correct than the other. One of the most important disciplines in the practice of discernment is learning how to recognise the way your personal biases impact on the way you hear and interpret things. When you hear God saying exactly what you were hoping to hear, there’s far more reason for caution than if you hear God saying something that’s obviously good but personally costly and disappointing.

Beware of jumping up and grabbing on to some verse that came up as though it was a personalised message to you for just such a situation as this. God can, and sometimes does speak to us that way, but these verses are very old, and they have spoken to a thousand situations already and the next one may not be the one you wanted it to be. But we are always tempted to grab on tight anyway, because we’d so love to have something that made the issues clearcut and relieved us of the responsibility of doing the hard work.

Good discernment usually involves some significant work of thinking and talking and praying and researching and nutting things through. Usually, and especially when it is about discerning what God is asking of us as a group, it is a communal activity. We need to get together and listen to one another. We need to make sure we have got the range of views represented in the room. We need to call in some expertise if we don't already have it among us. We need to make sure we have started talking to one another before anyone has invested too much work in developing an almost final proposal.

That's been one of the big failings of this Baptist Union process. On this third and most problematic document, they've only called for consultation after distributing a document that they thought was ready to be voted on. And so of course, when people start seriously questioning it, the people who did all that work are naturally going to want to defend it, because otherwise all their work might have been a waste of time.

Good discernment processes require us to invite everyone to be involved as early as possible. And they require us to listen respectfully to the views of those who see things differently. This has been one of the things we Baptists should understand well, because we are a tradition founded in respect for dissenting views. We have always believed that the voice of God may come to us first through the love dissenting voice. Think Jeremiah. Think Jesus. The voice we might be most tempted to suppress may be the voice through whom God is speaking to us. This kind of serious discernment takes time and care and imagination, but it is the pathway to recognising what is going on when God is moving on and doing something new.

In Jesus, God is certainly doing something new. It is something that brings love and mercy and liberation and joy and outrageously abundant life. But most of us are at least partially clinging to some former things, some ways of the past that lie behind us, and those things make it difficult for us to even recognise the fingerprints of God on the new things that are emerging, let alone embrace them with joyous freedom.

But God doesn't leave us stuck at the lights, bewildered and wondering where to from here. That's actually precisely why God came to us in Jesus: to show us exactly what it looks like when the new things that God is doing are embraced and lived to the full in a fully human life. Now we have so much more than the rather vague concept of discerning the movements of the Spirit. Instead we have a model for exactly what it looks like when lived out fully by one of us.

And while that doesn't answer my questions about the Baptist Union, or give me a short cut out of the hard work of grappling properly with those questions, it does assure me that there is One on the road ahead of us, One who knows exactly where he is going, and whose love and mercy surrounds us and lightens our path, even when the road to where we are going doesn't seem as though it should have started from here.