

'A New Day Dawns'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

And so it begins. A brand new chapter is commencing for us all today and with every new ministry partnership, change will come, and that's a good thing. Change is essential for life and growth. Change is vital for the mission of Christ to succeed. However change can come from many sources in our life and in the Church Jesus promised to build. We humans are very capable of making choices which trigger significant change in our lives and in the life of the Church. We are capable of producing many wonderful initiatives which can honour God and bless others.

But we really need to understand that there's a significant difference between a choice which is God-honouring and a choice which is God-initiated. There are many things we do in the life of the Church which honour God and they are good things to do. However, the only things which bear fruit in the Kingdom of God are those ideas, activities, visions and choices which are initiated and empowered by God, through His Holy Spirit.

Our experience confirms this. Right now there are thousands of great activities, programs, ministries and visions unfolding across the Church in this nation. If every one of those things were initiated by God, our nation would be experiencing a coast to coast revival – because everything God does will bear fruit and advance His Kingdom. However, not everything we do in God's name will bear the same fruit.

Since my first visit to Gunnedah Baptist Church last December, I have had a growing expectation and anticipation of what God is preparing to do in and through our Congregation as this new day dawns. But with that expectation comes the clear realisation that God can achieve very little if we keep doing everything the way we always have - whilst naively expecting a different outcome. Change must take place if the Church is to fulfil the mission of Christ and impact our community but we must discern together what that change looks like for us here and now and then discern how we might partner with God to usher in that change in the days and years ahead.

Now when I speak of change I am not foreshadowing anything specific because I do not come with any agenda. If you were expecting your new Pastor to arrive with a fresh vision for our Church and the passion to implement that vision as soon as I hit town – you will be disappointed. I begin this journey with no expectations and no pre-determined plans to change anything, stop anything or start anything. I do have one commitment though as our new shared journey begins today: and that is to partner with each of you in hearing God's voice and responding to God's leading as we move into this new chapter together in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.

When any group of disciples get serious about prayer and start asking God to show them the way forward as we seek to fulfil the mission of Christ – change will always follow that commitment. God is the ultimate change-agent. He is in the business of transformation, reformation, renewal and re-energisation and that always involves change and a community of believers will only experience that change when the individuals within that community draw near to God, listen for His voice and respond to His call.

In times of transition like this, there is one question we must constantly face:

In whom do we place our trust?

As I begin my time among you today and as we wait on God together for guidance in this next exciting chapter in our Kingdom journey, trust will be very important. Not just trust between us, that is essential and that will grow over time, but I want to encourage you all to place your greatest and deepest trust in the One Who placed me here – the same One Who placed you here.

I would like us to hear the words of the Apostle Paul as recorded in 1 Corinthians 12. This is a very familiar passage about the parts of the body representing the parts of the Body of Christ. I am reading from verse 12.

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

I take that last sentence VERY seriously. It is God Who has arranged the parts of the body – every one of them – just as He determined. It is really important therefore for us all to believe that this new partnership is God's doing first and foremost. That does not discount the importance of the Pastoral Search Committee and the prayers of this whole Congregation. Nor does it discount the discernment Michelle and I needed to exercise to make the decision to accept this call. However, all of us only had one task in end – that was and always is to discern the will of God, for it is God who arranges the parts of the Body – every one of them. That is the only reason I stand here today. Now there will be days ahead when we will all need to be reminded of that truth.

So let me take that a step further - if God is the One Who has intentionally placed me here for this season in the life of Gunnedah Baptist Church, He has done that for a purpose. He wants to use my specific gifts, experience, abilities and the message He has given me to help mould and shape His Kingdom ministry here. As that happens, things will change, things will be different – that is inevitable because I am not like any of the Pastors I follow here and my gifts are not their gifts. We all build upon the ministry of those who have gone before us, but today we begin a whole new leg of our shared journey in Christ. Therefore, our trust must be in God as we move into the unknown, with the understanding that God cannot move us to a new and better place without unsettling us and challenging the status quo.

Now in the same way, I will need to trust God with the people He has placed in this Church and be confident that His plan and purpose for Gunnedah Baptist Church and for this whole community can and will be fulfilled in and through the people whom He has deliberately positioned here at this point in our journey. You are not just here by your choice. You are here because God needs you to be here – every one of you. Your life's experience, your knowledge, your faith, your wisdom, your gifts and abilities, your resources and your prayers are all needed for God to do what God desires to do in and through this community of believers.

If we need more people with different skills and gifts - and we will - then we will ask God to lead them here in the days ahead. But we must begin where we are and trust that God has already given us everything we need in Christ and in each other to achieve His mission for today. I know we are small in number, but Jesus turned the entire world upside down and changed the whole course of human history with only twelve disciples.

We have more than that right here now and so there is nothing stopping us from impacting our community in a very significant way. We just need to trust the Holy Spirit within us and within those beside us as we tap into the abundant resources we already have.

2 Peter 1:3 “ ... given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”

God’s bidding is God’s enabling. In other words, God will resource what God initiates. God will never call any of us to pursue anything for His Kingdom without giving us all that we need for that task. Of course, very often His enabling comes on the run, moment by moment as we trust Him and exercise our faith. Like when Peter stepped out of the boat and took his first step on the water, there was no advance guarantee – his faith was immediate. Peter had to trust in the power of God each step of the way as Jesus called him further away from his comfort zone and the safety and predictability of his boat.

So too with us in the days ahead. We will be asked to step out of our boat and listen for the voice of our Lord and believe that He has given us all we need right now to do whatever He calls us to do. That means the ministries of this Church must be built upon and emerge from the gifts God has placed within us all. We must resist any temptation to prop up ministries we think we ‘should’ have when the vision, passion, gifts and skills to run those ministries may have left us years ago.

There are many wonderful things we could do as a Church, but the list of things God is calling us to do and has equipped us to do right now, may be shorter than our list of dreams and visions. So we must take our cues from the Spirit of God so that our time, energy, prayers and resources are not wasted on ‘good’ initiatives which may not be ‘God’ initiatives.

As always, our greatest role-model here is Jesus. When our Lord was here in the flesh he modelled ministry at its best to all of us and told us how this was to happen. He said something quite amazing which we gloss over too often. In John 5:19 we read where Jesus said He only did what He saw the Father doing and later He said He only spoke the words the Father gave Him to speak.

Jesus did not initiate any ministry when He was here as a man. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus discerned what the Father was already doing and then invested Himself in that ministry.

Jesus was more than capable of setting the agenda and coming up with a hundred great initiatives during His ministry and I’m sure they would have all been God-honouring and appropriate. But He didn’t do that. In this, Jesus gave us one of the most important keys to all successful ministry – and a foundational principle of my leadership over many years now, and that is simply this: We must let God be the One Who initiates all ministry. Like Jesus, we need to discern each day what God is already doing and then invest ourselves in that ministry.

So one of my most important tasks as your Pastor will be to help us all discern what God is already doing in our midst, in our community and indeed, in our own lives and then partner with God in that ministry. The degree to which we invest our time, prayers, energy and resources into those things, will determine the growth and fruit which will come to and from Gunnedah Baptist Church.

Now you might be thinking that sounds hard, after all, Jesus was the Son of God, of course He was in tune with what the Father was doing. But in actual fact, Jesus did all that as a man. That is why He would go off to pray – sometimes for a whole night. The only way Jesus knew what the Father was doing was to ask – just like you and I need to ask.

So that's what we will do – every day – we will ask God to reveal Himself and His plan and purpose to us and we will keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking because that's what Jesus told us to do and because that is more often than not the only way we hear from God – we ask!

There are thousands of books that have been written telling us how to be the Church in action and often people have complicated something which is really simple. There are two simple, but foundational questions we all need to be asking God every single day: *“What are You doing Lord?”* and *“How can I be part of it?”* Our task, together, will be to discern what part God wants us to play in the amazing mission of Christ and then have the courage to trust Him as we invest our time, our energy, our money, our hearts and our lives to that end. The reason that everything Jesus did in His ministry achieved the desired outcome and bore the fruit it needed to is simple. He only did what He saw the Father doing. Jesus responded to the Father's initiative as He was led by the Holy Spirit.

In 2020 in Australia, most Christian Churches are ageing and shrinking; most ministries are not connecting with the hearts of the next generation; the way we are 'doing' church is not engaging the people for whom the Church exists – those who are yet to taste the wonders of God's amazing grace in Christ. Clearly we are not hearing from God. The more we discern what God is doing and participate in that, the more our Church will change, our community will change, our own lives will change - and it will all be God's doing – for only God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly more than we ask or even imagine and He does it all through Christ, in us – the hope of glory.

Now I'm not suggesting that *everything* must change. I am not about to roll in a bulldozer to drag away traditions and practices which many of us hold dear and have related to for most of our lives. Change doesn't always come by turning everything we do on its head – change often comes by adding things into the mix which are not here at present. Introducing new ministries which run alongside old ministries so that the Church is re-born and re-visioned without tossing out all the old ways which, for many, are still precious to them in their walk with God.

So how will that happen? Well at the moment, only God knows how that needs to happen in 2020 in Australia and in Gunnedah and across this region. God also knows the part that we, in partnership with all His people, need to play for His kingdom to be advanced and for people to encounter Christ and be transformed by His amazing grace. God knows the new faces, new gifts and new skills which need to be brought into our congregation to effect that re-birthing of the Church which Jesus promised to build.

So beginning today I want us all to start asking God those two very simple questions every day: *“What are you doing, Lord?”* and *“How can I be part of it?”* Those are the same two questions our Church leadership team and all our ministry leaders need to be asking every day. If we ask these questions sincerely and really want answers, God will respond. God will give us whatever we need to partner with Him in the ministries He desires to initiate and empower in this part of His Kingdom.

And so it begins - a new day has dawned for us all and God is asking each of us to trust the Holy Spirit to lead us into an unknown future, fully assured of God's grace, God's empowering presence and God's guidance.

May Your Kingdom come Lord, may Your will be done in this Church, in this community, as it is in heaven! Speak Lord, Your servants are listening. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.