

Joining some dots on the Change Journey

April 2022 - Lent 5

Isaiah 43:16-21

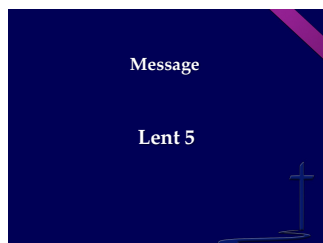
16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, 17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: 18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. 19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. 20 The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, 21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Philippians 3:4b-14

3:4b If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

John 12:1-8

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."



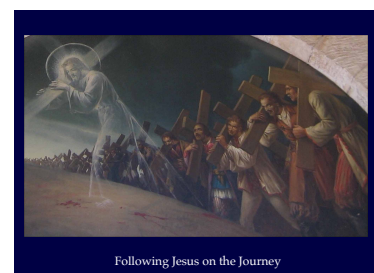
Introduction:

The readings for today are a feast with so much on offer. Isaiah, Paul and Jesus are all in top form. As I contemplated them with one eye and us in our context today, I was drawn to bring a message that links Isaiah, Paul and Jesus.

The key to what I will bring is very simple: Jesus is on a journey that he calls us to join as he leads.

During Lent we are very aware that this journey is a journey to the Father via a cross and resurrection.

This is the essential nature of Christianity; joining Jesus as our brother on this journey involving cross and resurrection in the truth and power of his words and his Holy Spirit.



Following Jesus on the Journey

Can we now consider what the passages we heard today say in the light of that?

Development:

So what does Isaiah say about the LORD God relevant to Jesus being on a journey to which he calls us to join him on?

Isaiah 43:16-21
¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick. ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people. ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters

^{19b} I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

And we hear God's intention or purpose in that.

²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

Isaiah is telling the people of God in their Babylonian exile that the LORD God of Israel will make a way through the evil chaos as represented by the sea and the wilderness. The point being he will enable them to walk through the difficult, threatening places and will provide fresh water for them in the wilderness journey.

Within this announcement of new roads and paths there is some travelling tips from the Lord God:

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

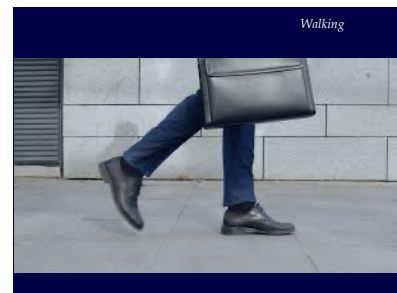
It's good to feature this as it was a Word we prayed into for St Matthew's at our Saturday Prayer meeting last September.

So let's bring this together:

God was telling his people in 600 BC that he was setting out new roads through hostile places as part of the new thing he was doing, a new thing which was already present to be seen – if you are perceptive.

As I contemplate and squeeze this some basic realities emerge which need to be understood.

1. Travel is about movement. As with all adventure, the spiritual journey is about going from the known to the unknown. The physical art of walking even illustrates this. It involves shifting our weight from the foot safe on the ground to one still making contact. That involves courage, trust and commitment. Unless we go really slowly it involves being off balance. If we run this is more so and we may even be airborne - with no ground contact at all!



- a. Those of you who moved country or city may know this in other ways. A way opens for you to emigrate which you take shifting from what you know to a whole new context where anything might happen. I call it the 'Abraham effect leaving land, people and family' for what I will show you.
2. It is this imbalance that forms the spiritual dimension of the journey. God provides the way. God is the 'Way-maker' and to walk on the way God opens -especially if it runs through dangerous or hostile territory- still involves shifting weight forward in faith. Jesus would later call people to this journey by saying "Repent and Believe" or, "let go and commit yourself afresh".

- a. In very simple terms, the spiritual journey is about change. God makes it possible for his people to move, letting go of the past, taking hold of the future, letting rubbish slip away and embracing fresh life in new circumstances.

So the obvious points so far are:

- A. God provides a way for us to walk as our life with Him – even through challenging circumstances – The Way we see fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
- B. Walking in God’s provided way involves change every step of the way which is our prime spiritual exercise. Following Jesus means ongoing change. That’s the business of discipleship.

- OK?
- All clear?
- Sound Teaching?

Now to Paul

But there is a big fly in this ointment!

There is a spoiler that is so common we might miss it altogether as altogether normal: Not everyone welcomes change.

In fact, religious people of all varieties -not just Christians- in particular seem among the most determined to avoid change. Tradition!

The polite word for this is ‘conservatism’ which describes a perspective of being more interested in holding to what we have than taking steps into what lies ahead and beyond our reach. Conservatives value things as they are and work to keep them that way because that’s known and comfortable and safe. Think of building three booths so we can stay on the mount of transfiguration.

Barbara and I have just moved into a new home. With every week it becomes more comfortable. If after 5 years someone says you need to go somewhere else we will risk losing our comfy zone. We may decline the journey involved because we want to hold to the familiar comfort of where we are.

Here’s the thing: Religious people have a knack for talking about the spiritual journey while actually avoiding it at every opportunity. We build institutions that become self-serving, we develop entitlements, we arrange things for ourselves and our club members. Jesus saw this in the Scribes and Pharisees and called them out as hypocrites and blind guides. They had arrived and were going nowhere. Woe be tied anyone who disturbed or threatened their comfortable arrangements as Jesus did.

“No journey for us thank you very much - we like it as things are.”

That is common in institutional religion.

In today’s epistle we hear from someone who was dynamited out of that – one Saul of Tarsus.

It took a voice from heaven, a blinding light, being grounded and a few days of blindness for Saul to hear that he was on the wrong path, but he did hear.

In his words the institutionalisation of faith as the Torah or Law of Moses was exposed as the comfort zone that had become his prison, keeping him pinned down in his walk to God. His journey was going nowhere because he was invested in the Law as a set of manipulated rules. He names this as the flesh, the human attempt to substitute something for authentic spiritual exercise.

He goes so far to describe what had been his treasures forming his comfort-zone as ‘Rubbish’. What this often involves is all the credentials we may build up to look good in the institution. Today that is done with letters and titles before or after our name, power dressing, accolades of ‘cool’ and embodied pretensions. They all build up a preference to to stay exactly where we are because they suggest, we have arrived!

Let me read the first part of Philippians 3 again: to hear how Paul says this:

^{3:4b} If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, (*think aristocracy*) a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as **rubbish**, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him,

So what he had before and apart from Christ is now rubbish. On his journey in Jesus Christ he has let go of all that. So remembering the dynamics of walking, shifting weight in faith from one foot on the ground to one before us off the ground hear how he continues:



¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ **I press on toward the goal** for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

So what is Paul modelling here about the journey of following Christ?

- A. The props of self-sufficiency are rubbish on the spiritual journey. Don't treasure them.
- B. The spiritual journey in Christ is about 'pressing forward' to embrace the future God has for us.
 - a. Paul understands the journey God calls him on in Christ-
"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Paul does perceive it and presses forward.

- OK?
- All clear?
- Sound Teaching?

That which stops us from moving on and embracing the new thing God has for us through Christ is rubbish, even if it took years to achieve, cost a lot of money or has been in the family a long time, whatever!

Jesus, Martha and Judas

Finally there is a scandal involved in all this.

Here it is: Not everyone gets it and people get it at different rates.

I am reminded of a repeat experience in the socialist culture I experienced in Europe which was unaccepting of individuals having a new idea let alone making a plan! For anything to get traction it had to appear that a round table discussion had generated it and everyone had a hand in birthing it.

Imagine asking when Autumn really began this year and only deciding via a committee that produced an official answer to the satisfaction of all.

Any rugged individualists who could not cope considered emigrating somewhere the individual could still decide for themselves and do things.

The fact is that people recognise and learn things at different rates. Some people get it very quick and others need more exposure and more time.

So when Isaiah asks in God's voice:

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, **do you not perceive it?**”

The answer is: some get it today, others will get it tomorrow but some will not get it until it runs over them.

Jesus has been modelling the new thing day-in, day-out for 2 to 3 years. It's all over him and overflowing. Even the dimmest would admit, there is something new about him?

Now comes the perception test.

Those on a spiritual journey shifting from their past to their future, letting go of rubbish, pressing forward are off balance and moving.

Those not on a spiritual journey may be enjoying the excitement and the free lunch while resisting every change they can.

So a week or so before his death, Jesus and his disciples are having dinner with dear friends: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. We know these people. Lazarus had been raised after 3 days in a tomb illustrating the new thing God was doing which totally annoyed the religious authorities. Martha was the organised host feeding, providing a clean bed caring for Jesus and the guests showing love through service. Mary is the heartfelt friend who loves through personal contact, time, touch and talk.

Jesus is bringing the new thing and Mary gets it. At some point

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

Prophets are not crazy, just the first to get it and loud about it.



It was customary to welcome guests at a party by anointing them with some perfume. Usually, a small amount was dripped on the head or rubbed on the face. This made people feel special and removed the problem of body odour which could dampen any social event. But instead of applying a small dab of perfume, Mary took the whole jar, about 350 grams of top-grade perfume, and poured it out exclusively on Jesus' feet. Feet were considered the lowliest part of the body as they came in contact with the dirt and dust of the road way and so were not anointed. The only time

ointment and perfume were usually applied to feet was in embalming. But Mary lavishes all her affection and costly perfume on Jesus' feet while he eats.

If this is not enough, Mary then lets her hair down and uses it to wipe his feet. Jewish women wore their hair tied up in public unless they were prostitutes. In total servitude she pours herself out over Jesus. It's dramatic, extravagant, costly, sensual and controversial.

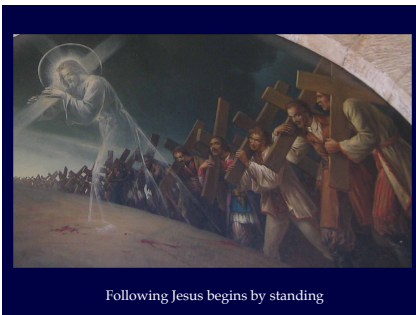
Then comes another voice

Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii (*-a day labourer's annual income-*) and the money given to the poor?"

Judas was not seeing the new thing God was doing - even though he literally walked with Jesus, his head was in the present if not the past. He was not leaning forward or pressing in. He knew today's market prices and yesterday's best practice and calculated. We all know where that would take him in fighting God's new thing!

Conclusion

If we want to be a church 'declaring God's praise' we need to be leaning forward on this journey with Jesus - taking steps, letting go, recognising rubbish for what it is, moving from known to unknown through difficulties representing the cross towards the new thing God births.



Following Jesus begins by standing

But it starts with hearts being un-tethered for the journey.
It begins with standing up to take first steps.
That's a decision of the heart.

Let's move from talk to walk by standing to mark the beginning of our journey afresh.