

2nd June 2019

ABC report about the Uniting Church

It is now 5 months since Epiphany when we received a 'Star Word' and were invited to reflect on what it might mean for us. Several people have shared their encounter with their Star Word. It has been fascinating to hear the diverse stories that have been inspired by that reflection. Two more came to my attention this week.

Jackie Cowan shared with me her engagement with her Star Word that had been reignited by the report on ABC radio last Sunday morning. It was reported that some members of the Uniting Church felt they were being pushed out of the church. Now that is manifestly not true. The decision of last year's Assembly on marriage was very clear that people were free to hold to their conviction about marriage – whether it was something only to be celebrated between a man or a woman or whether it was a covenantal relationship between two people that could even be two same-gendered people. The Assembly was adamant that people who feel convicted of both positions were respected and clear that no matter what our conviction on this particular issue, everyone who loves Jesus has a place in this church. It seems that for some it is not enough to have their own position respected, they are adamant that those who are convicted by their study of Scripture and prayer of another position should not be afforded the same respect.

That the church is not prepared to exclude those others from the church has been interpreted as pushing themselves out of the church. It is, of course, their personal choice if they do not want to be part of this church. But they are not being pushed. They are absolutely respected. But they are asked to equally respect those who have come to a different understanding. They are not being forced "to worship on the street" as one person is reported to have alleged. I am pleased to hear that our church leadership will take this up with the ABC. I know I expect better from our ABC.

The following was Jackie's engagement with her Star Word this week:

"At Christmas, we received stars with words on them ... mine was 'knowledge'. Knowledge is what we have gained over the years through family, friends, education, travel, literature and experiences. We gain knowledge for ourselves or we share knowledge with others.

The article that I read in the ABC was about the Uniting Church and some churches or church members feeling that they were being forced out of the church due to a decision regarding same-sex marriage. I have always believed that being part of a church, part of the Gospel teachings, was to love, accept and respect others ... but it would seem this is maybe not universal. The question, of course, is why is it an issue now? In my experience, where there is homophobia, misogyny is not far behind, and not something I feel is part of the church that the community values (or at least not at the Uniting Church)."

On Sunday Margaret Woolcock is going to share where her engagement with her Star Word has taken her, and the project she is inviting us to join her in – a UnitingWorld project called 'Flushed with Happiness'.

How is your interaction with your Star Word going?

9th June 2019

Pentecost

As I walked down Brook Street late one night a week or two ago, having returned by train from a late meeting in the city, the footpath was strewn with autumn leaves. I realised they weren't there earlier in the day as I walked that street en route to catch the train. Obviously a change had blown through town in the interim. Only the previous week I had been talking with my brother-in-law about how much later the trees were shedding their leaves this year. Not so long ago the trees would already be bare by that time of year. But a wind had blown through and the season had seemingly flipped in the course of one afternoon.

Walking through that swath of leaves was a beautiful sight. In fact it was a bit of fun kicking some of them away as I made my way back to my car. It lightened my weary soul. Things do change when a wind blows. But that wind did not just blow in that isolated location. A wind comes from somewhere else, and then goes somewhere else. It didn't start at the boundary line of Sunbury and stop again when it got to the other side.

Today is Pentecost. We celebrate the Wind, the Spirit of God, blowing through the first group of disciples post-resurrection. We sometimes mistakenly talk of that Wind 'coming' on the Day of Pentecost as if God's Spirit was absent from the world before this. But the Wind, the Pneuma, the Spirit (all the same word in the Bible) of God was blowing in the opening verses of the Bible as God spoke and the world was created. That same Wind of God's Spirit was active all the way down through the prophetic tradition. And it didn't stop when it got to the other side of that room in which the disciples were gathered. It blew them out into the streets to engage with the various peoples gathered from the four corners of the world for the Pentecost festival in their own way of speaking.

It was fun. How exciting must that have been? It wasn't planned to the nth degree. It wasn't premeditated. It picked up those disciples and took them into ministry and a way of faith-sharing they had not planned, intended, or imagined. That's the way it often is with the Spirit of God. The Wind blows us into unexpected opportunities to share the transformative life-giving story of God's work in Jesus Christ.

And that Wind has continued to blow through the world ever since. It still does. It is still 'blowing' us into new ministry and service here in Sunbury in 2019. While we seldom welcome change – because it does mean making adjustments in our attitudes, in our thinking, in our believing – if we open ourselves to catch that Wind in our sails it can be a truly exhilarating experience.

And so Christ's Church continues to pray: Come, Spirit, come!

16th June 2019

Being clear about what we are saying

Words, words, and more words. But what do the words actually mean? That's always the challenge in any dialogue. Does the person listening understand the spoken words the same way the person speaking them does? And then we must factor in how the meaning of words has been fluid over time.

When visiting with the Hosana congregation in Dili during my ministry at Ringwood, I had to be careful about how I spoke about many things. They have been through a different history than we have. Their experience of life is different from mine. Preaching at Hosana required a very different sermon than I preached at Ringwood. There needed to be a cultural translation inserted into our conversations.

This Sunday, Nathan Warrick speaks to us about how critical that sort of process is working amongst the outlaw biker culture as part of the God Squad. Outlaw bikers speak a different cultural language than we do in our comfortable western middle class church. We would likely find much of their conversation objectionable. Often a word will have a very different meaning in that very different culture.

Just after I had recorded and posted my little video to Facebook letting people know that Nathan would be talking about this stuff at St. Andrew's this Sunday, I browsed down through some recent FB posts (I hadn't looked for a few days, so there will be lots I missed) I came across an article a friend of mine had posted. It talks about how language has changed in the course of the Bible being translated again and again down through the centuries. The writer of the article has been reading all sorts of old translations of the Bible in a variety of languages. One thing he discovered is that the word 'homosexual', which only appears in our Bible on a handful of occasions, only began to appear in German Bibles in 1893. The word now translated to 'homosexual' by the American-funded translation team, was the German word *knabenschänder*. That German word means 'boy molester', particularly boys in the 8 to 12 year old age group. This age-old reference to pederasty suddenly became a reference to homosexuality. We know the damage this changed translation has caused throughout the church, so we need be careful when we hear people say "this is how the Bible has been interpreted for 2000 years". That's not true.

So I am all the more conscious now about checking whether the person I am discussing difficult subjects with understands the words I am speaking to mean the same thing I understand them to mean, and vice versa. As the church continues to be an increasingly minority presence in our society, we will need to pay attention to how we communicate with others who do not share our faith history.

The apostle Paul was renowned for the way he strove to be all things to all people. He modified how he shared the story of God in Jesus Christ with people from other cultures. He was constantly observing that culture and

seeking to express his faith in that cultural lingo and thought-form. Just as the God Squad does among the biker culture, we must be increasingly doing so among mainstream Australian culture.

23rd June 2019

Not available this week

30th June 2019

Discipleship

A couple of weeks ago I introduced those at worship to our lovely Maggie, our gorgeous pussy cat. I spoke about the love and care we show our pets being a metaphor of God's relationship with us. It goes beyond just caring for our pet's material needs. We want a relationship with them. And they do become little personalities, don't they? What do they say about the longer we with live with our pet the more like them we look?

Well, this week we experienced something of the pain of investing such love and care into Maggie. She had her annual 'shot' on Monday morning. And we had a pussy who was not herself later that day. She was very sorry for herself. She didn't want to be touched. She didn't want to sit on our lap. She wasn't eating or drinking. She wasn't going to the toilet. Her nose was very dry, and we suspected that meant she had a fever. We were feeling quite concerned. She wasn't 'just a cat'. This was Maggie. Except it wasn't the Maggie we knew and loved. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't well. It continued throughout the night. And we felt such worry for her. Another dimension to the metaphor of how God feels when things go awry in our lives.

Thankfully the vet was able to confirm that she had a fever, and couldn't find other issues. He gave her a shot to bring the fever down. Later that day our Maggie was back to her old self (by-and-large). In this instance, the action we took to redress the cause of Maggie's pain did take that pain away. We know it won't always be possible. Life is not like that. And we know that when that time of parting comes we will be devastated.

In this week's reading from 2 Kings chapter 2, we observe the pain Elisha felt when he was parted from his mentor Elijah. He cried out, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" It's an insight into the humanity of the prophet. But it was also a question about the future. Was God going to continue to be present with him now that Elijah wasn't there to embody that reality? Was he going to be left bereft and defeated? The answer came as he "took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen on him." He dared trust the God he had seen in the one who had taught him about God, who had taught him both the privilege and the responsibility of what it was to be a prophet.

This reading invites us to reflect on who taught us about God, who taught us about discipleship. What did we learn from them? Have we been prepared to take up that mantle of discipleship they laid on the ground before us? It is not thrust upon us against our will. We must choose whether we take it up or walk away. Elisha felt he could do no other but take it up, with all that it meant.

May we do the same.
