

Learning to speak faith

Jeremiah 1:4-10 and John 6:56-69, 4th February 2018, Rev Belinda Groves

I was married in '95 and found myself, two weeks later, living in Japan and needing a post office. I needed a post office because this was BC, before computers, before personal computers at least – I sent my first email later that year - so I memorised one phrase, “Where is the post office?” and, starting at the station, began asking people, “*Yubinyoku wa, doko desu ka?*” When they answered I didn’t understand a word – but I’d bow and smile and use my other Japanese phrase – “*Domo arigato!* Thankyou!” – and go in the direction they’d pointed, around the next bend in the maze of laneways, and ask the next person. Until finally an unmistakably post office-like building emerged and I posted my first letters home.

That story reminds me of the journey we began, as a church, at the beginning of last year with two questions, “Who are we as a body of believers and what is God calling us to do?” In May this became a church review process, with input from the National Church Life Survey, people’s own stories of faith, and seminars on spirituality and mission and what is happening in Australian society, and though it was a struggle to absorb and understand it all, we kept going in the direction the Holy Spirit was pointing, and in November affirmed the three goals visible on our bulletin cover: *Led by the Spirit, we will explore together what it means to follow Jesus today, build an inclusive, caring community and share God’s love and justice through our words and actions.*

But the goals were not our destination. They are more like further directions. And so, as we begin the new year, I am going to be reflecting on each of our goals over the next three Sundays.

And today we are looking at: *Led by the Spirit, we will explore together what it means to follow Jesus today.*

The language in this statement brings together a lot of thought and discussion and prayer. It begins by affirming that, for this church, following Jesus is not a solo activity, not something we do alone. We are ‘led by the Spirit’ ... ‘together’. We acknowledge the presence and lordship and guidance – our need - for the Spirit of God, and we acknowledge our need for each other in working out how to live faithful lives.

And the statement ends with the word ‘today’ reflecting a strong concern in this congregation – there was a lot of discussion about how we worded this - that our living out of faith, our expression of faith, must continue to communicate in a world that is rapidly changing.

But at the heart of this statement is another carefully chosen word - ‘explore’. The statement affirms that for this church ‘what it means to follow Jesus’ or ‘what it means to have faith’ is not simply adhering to a set of statements or beliefs – we do not have a creed or statement of beliefs as a church - but needs to be worked out - explored – lived as part of a lived experience. We commit ourselves to a faith that is dynamic and ongoing, active and open. We want to be live our lives in relationship with God.

I was reminded, writing this, of meeting up with Jeanette at Morling College, many years ago, on the day of her accreditation interview for the NSW/ACT. She was bemoaning that she’d been asked, “What article of the faith would you die for?” and she’d thought of the perfect answer afterwards, that she should have responded by saying what she was living for – for the incredible grace and love of God, for instance, or the revelation in Jesus of how we are live out that incredible grace and love. Fortuitously for me, a few years later, I got the same question and was able to use her great response, but I now realise how true to Canberra Baptist that response is as well. Faith is about a lived relationship with God.

I have been reading Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity* over January, and he argues that, in the twentieth century, faith can be defined as 'assent', you are a Christian when you assent or agree that a set of Christian beliefs are true; but that, historically, faith has been thought of and lived out in a range of ways. Faith has been understood as 'trust', trusting that God is the one upon whom we can depend and base our lives. It has been understood as 'faithfulness', dedicating our lives to God and paying attention to this relationship through a life of prayer, of spiritual practice, of compassion and justice. And it has been understood as 'vision', of seeing the love of God for us and for the world as a lens through which we view the world and live out our lives. Borg says there is a place for 'assent' – that we should affirm the reality of God, the centrality of Jesus and the value of the Scriptures for our lives – but that understanding faith purely as 'assent' turns Christian faith into a head matter, whether we hold the correct set of beliefs in our head correctly – whereas 'trust' and 'faithfulness' and 'vision' make faith about a lived experience with God.

Two weeks ago Gary and Miriam and I were in Bangladesh visiting Baptist World Aid projects and I took a book by Eugene Peterson, who produced *The Message Bible*, to read it in the car – famous last words with the up and down and dodging around other vehicles – but I found in it a definition of prayer – “a product of a living relationship between human souls and God” – which sounded a lot like definitions of faith I've been talking about – as a lived relationship, not just a set of beliefs. “Memorising models and patterns for prayer, Peterson writes, “is not the way to mature in prayer any more than learning stock phrases as a child ('You're welcome'... 'Thankyou'.... 'Please pass the potatoes'...) is the way to become fluent in the English language... We [must] saturate our minds and memories in Christ and the Scriptures, and then go about our day's work without a prepared script, unselfconsciously trusting the Holy Spirit language.”

We were in the very process of learning stock phrases in Bangla. Each day we would travel out from Mymensingh to visit a self-help group or women's committee or children's club and would go through the stock phrases we had learnt. “*Nomoshkar!* (or *Salaam Wailaikum* if the group were predominantly Moslem.) *Amanam Belinda.*” And on one very memorable occasion Gary astounded us all by saying, “*Nomoshkar! Amanam Gary. Amidesh Australia!*” He'd been studying his Lonely Planet Guide and could now say he came from Australia.

Stock phrases can be very useful – they can help you find the post office! - and they are foundational for adult language learners. And yet learning to speak a language fluently goes beyond the stock phrases we memorise in the beginning. It is a gradual matter of making connections between the vocabulary we are building up and the grammar we are learning, of absorbing the patterns around us, until we are able to creatively combine language to respond to new situations and new contexts and express our own thoughts and feelings.

And perhaps this is how we can also understand faith. That the beliefs we give assent to, our first stumbling conversations with God, are the foundation of a living faith, a gradual, life-long matter of making connections between our experiences of trusting God, of being faithful to and focused on God, and continuing to see the world through God's eyes, of absorbing the love of God around us, learning all the time how to speak 'faith' in new situations and new contexts, to express the hope within us.

But what we also borrow from the analogy of language acquisition is that this way of doing faith is not the easy way. There is rigour in learning stock phrases, but there is equal rigour plus courage and determination, and a willingness to make mistakes and occasionally look foolish, in becoming fluent. And so it is with becoming fluent in faith. It requires rigour and courage and determination. It requires trust, in God and in ourselves, as we constantly move from the comfort zone of what we know to what we do not. It requires being faithful and focused on our relationships with God. And it involves immersing ourselves in God's context

and culture, until all our conversations, mundane and significant, are full of good news and hope and grace.

We are learning to speak fluent faith as a congregation. With the basics of belief under our belts we are going about our daily lives, trusting God, being faithful to God and learning to love the world and each other as God does, unselfconsciously trusting the Holy Spirit language, as we live out and speak out words of eternal life. *Led by the Spirit, we will explore together what it means to follow Jesus today.*