

'And So It Begins'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

And so it begins. A brand new chapter is commencing for us all, and with every new ministry partnership, change will come, and that's a good thing, as long as it is God Who initiates and oversees that change. Change is essential for life and growth and vital for the mission of Christ.

Now in many ways I have been preparing for this day for eighteen months, since the first suggestion was made to me that I consider being part God's ministry here. Throughout that time I've had a growing expectation and anticipation of what God is preparing to do in and through Lismore Regional Mission in this new season. 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 result. Change must come if the Church is to fulfil the mission of Christ and we need to discern together what that change looks like and how we can partner with God to bring it about in the days and years ahead.

Now when I talk about change in this context, I am not foreshadowing anything nor do I come with any agenda. I begin this journey with no expectations and no pre-determined plans to change anything, stop anything or start anything. I have one pre-determined commitment only: to partner with each of you in hearing from God and God alone and responding to His leading as we move into this new chapter.

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. God is in the business of transformation, reformation, renewal and re-invigoration and that always involves change.

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 shared 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.

As our reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us today, it is God Who has arranged the parts of the body – every one of them – just as He determined. (1 Cor. 12:18) I take that verse VERY seriously. It is really important therefore for us all to believe that this new partnership is God's doing first and foremost. There may be days ahead when we will all need to be reminded of that truth! But 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 Lismore Regional Mission, He has done that for a purpose. He wants to use my specific gifts, experience, abilities, vision and the message He has given me to help mould and shape the ministry here.

As that happens, things will change, things will be different – that is inevitable because I am not like any of the Ministers 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 journey into the unknown. However, 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 Lismore Regional Mission can and will be fulfilled in and through the people whom He has deliberately positioned here at this point in our journey.

If we need more people with different skills and gifts – then I will trust God to lead them here in the days ahead and we will be praying accordingly. But we must begin where we are and trust that God has already given us everything we need in Christ to achieve His mission and we need to trust the Holy Spirit within us and those beside us as we tap into the abundant resources we already have.

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 left us years ago.

Now when Jesus was here in the flesh, modelling ministry at its best to all of us, 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 in the flesh.** Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus discerned what the Father was already doing and then participated in that ministry.

Jesus was more than capable of setting the agenda and coming up with a hundred great initiatives during His ministry and they would have all been God-honouring and appropriate. But He didn't do that - and, as such - Jesus gave us one of the most important keys to all successful ministry – and a foundational principle of my leadership, and that is: **Let God be the One Who initiates all ministry.**

So one of my most important tasks as your Senior Minister 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 Lismore Regional Mission.

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!

There are thousands of books that have been written telling us how to be the Church in action and people have complicated something which is really simple. There are two simple, but foundational prayers we all need to be praying 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 that 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.

If our Churches are ageing and shrinking; if our ministries are not connecting with the hearts of the next generation; if 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 – then clearly we are not hearing from God. As we discern what God is doing and participate in that, our Church will change, our communities 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 am 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 2017 in Australia and in Lismore and this region. God 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 grace. God knows the new faces and new gifts and skills which need to be led into our congregations to effect that re-birthing of the Church of Jesus Christ.

So beginning today I want us all to start asking God those two very simple questions:

“What are you doing, Lord?”

“How can I be part of it?”

Those are the same two questions our Church Council needs to be asking every day and all our ministry leaders and if we ask them genuinely 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, assured of God's grace, God's empowering presence and guidance.

May Your Kingdom come Lord, may Your will be done! Amen.