

The Parable of the River

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Jesus gave us a lot of parables about the Kingdom of God. Today I want to give you one of my own:

The Kingdom of God is like a river – a magnificent, ever flowing, ever changing river of life which brings freshness and food and healing and beauty and power wherever it goes. People are attracted to this river and rely on it entirely. Without the river, their life lacks purpose, sustenance, and their very existence is even under threat because this river gives them life in so many ways. It defines their identity, for they are River People by nature. They are River People by calling.

Now since the beginning of time, these River People would follow the river and they never remained in one place for too long. But all that changed one day, a long time ago. Many of the River People forgot who they were and why they were here and they stopped moving and set up a permanent camp alongside the river. Before long another group set up camp across on the other bank and then another group a little further down stream.

They started to feel 'settled' for the first time and their nomadic instincts started to fade. It wasn't long before they had thrown away their tents, their back packs and their hiking gear. They actually rejoiced in the flawed understanding that they had now 'arrived' at some 'destination,' even though deep down they knew their actual destination was not where they had settled at all. They were born to be pilgrim people, always on a journey to a promised land. They forgot this defining truth and built permanent dwellings beside the river. Some of them were absolute mansions compared to the tents they once called home.

Then they started to fill those dwellings with all the things they could never have when they were pilgrims on a journey, aliens and strangers passing through this world, River People with only one back-pack full of essentials to their name. They then began to concentrate on the land around them, and not the river of life. They began to evolve into Land People, not River People and then they did the strangest thing, the most outrageous thing imaginable: they began to claim the land around them as their own and they even built fences and walls to keep people in and keep others out so they could continue to enjoy what they decided was now their own riverfront piece of land.

This all seemed so natural to them now, years after they decided to settle in one place - even though it stood opposed to everything they had ever known or been taught by their ancestors. You see, the river did not belong to them, nor did the land adjacent to the river. They could not claim a particular part of land or view of the river as their own. But some of them began 'marketing' and promoting their view of the river as better than that of their neighbours - those who were once travelling companions in former generations, but who are now competitors in this new river view market.

Over time it got even more bizarre. The children and grandchildren of these former river nomads, didn't seem to have any concept of the importance of the river, much less its sovereignty and freedom and power. The great river stories and mighty adventures their parents and grandparents lived through were no longer being told around the campfire or passed down to the children, for there was no campfire anymore and there was no context for those stories. The younger generations had only ever known their particular view of the river and this was the place they had always known as 'home'. The River People's journey over many generations was not a 'journey' anymore. They had arrived and stopped moving with the river.

In time the younger generations actually moved away from the river and set up new dwellings in the hills and offered alternative views and attracted people to move away with them. In just a generation or two, they had lost all connection with their ancestors and didn't even know they were born to be River People and called to follow the river. They had a few excursions back to the river now and then, but in time, they learned to exist without the river having any daily impact on their lives.

Then the unthinkable happened, sometimes it takes many years, other times it can happen suddenly after a major flood. This ever-changing river which will not be confined or controlled, actually cut a new path through the valley and the former river people who had well established homes and fenced off waterfront oasis' were no longer anywhere near the river which once defined them as people. They were stuck out in the middle of a dry wasteland where the river used to run in ages past.

What should they do in such a situation? Well it's obvious, isn't it? They needed to grab their tents, their backpacks and put on their hiking shoes again and do what they were created to do: follow the river again. They had to move. They had to change their position as the flow of the river changed. But that's not so easy after you've settled in one location for many years, many generations, in fact. They had actually gotten rid of their tents and they hadn't needed a back pack for many years because they hadn't moved anywhere and they now have all their accumulated possessions in lovely fixed cupboards and they have infinitely more than they ever had before. They would need 1000 back-packs to carry it all!

Of course they couldn't move, and what's more, they didn't really *want* to move because they liked it there. It was familiar, it was predictable, it was comfortable and they had mistakenly decided this was their 'home' and their destination. Yes, their parents and grandparents only came to this place because of the river, but that was a long time ago. Yes, they realised that new people were no longer joining their ranks like they use to when there were River People on a journey with a purpose. In fact their numbers were falling each year as they farewelled their elders. They used to have a mission and a calling as they followed the river. Now, they liked their new 'home' and even though they don't have the river anymore, they decided they could live without it.

Such is the parable of the river and the River People. Did you like my parable? Before you answer too quickly, have you worked out that the whole story is about you and me, here and now? This is not a parable any of us should 'like' any more than the rich man 'liked' Jesus telling him how hard it was for camel to pass through the an eye of a needle! We should be squirming just a little as the reality of our situation is revealed by the Holy Spirit. Let me switch to another metaphor in case the river doesn't work for you. This one is from Jesus.

Do you remember when Nicodemus came to Jesus one night to secretly enquire about the kingdom of God? We read about it in chapter 3 of John's gospel. Can you remember what Jesus told Him? He told Nicodemus that nobody will experience the reality of the kingdom of God unless they are born again of water and the Spirit. He told him that flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. Then Jesus said this: *"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."* (John 3:5-8).

Whether it's a wind or a river, either way, the picture is clear. We cannot confine, contain, capture, tie down or even predict a river or a wind. The wind is always blowing and we are meant to move with the wind, not stubbornly stand against it. Just as we River People were never meant to set up a permanent camp by that river!

We needed to follow the river of God, the river of life, the river of His will and purpose in every age, every generation and every culture. If we are really serious about reconnecting to the mission of Christ and being part of the Church which Jesus promised to build, then we need to take a serious look at how we got to the place we are now. We are the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren I was referring to in my parable of the River. We are the ones who have lost touch with our nomadic DNA and calling as pilgrims. I am not just talking about our congregation, I am talking about the whole Christian Church. We need to know when and how the Church lost its cutting edge in our society.

When did we set up camp beside the river of God and toss our tents away and refuse to keep moving with the river of life? We need to accept that God called us to be a *pilgrim* people, those whose destination and dwelling-place is beyond this life, beyond this earthly kingdom. 'Settling down' and 'growing roots' in one philosophical location, with one particular expression of the Church, was never God's desire and it was never how the Church was supposed to look or behave.

Now I must make something clear for anyone who is getting nervous about what's coming. Nothing's coming. I have no personal agenda and no preconceived plans in terms of our structure or practice or ministry profile. I have received no specific revelation from God about how different our Church will be in the days ahead. I do believe that this new Worship and Ministry Centre will be a place where God will be worshipped and the mission of Christ will be embraced in the decades ahead. I can't tell you if it will Uniting Church people in here or someone else after we have all gone. But I know that God gave me a vision the day after the flood of this place full of people in worship before God. I received the same vision again a few weeks ago. As encouraging as that vision was for me, it was also confronting because if the current trend continues, there will be no Uniting Church congregations operating in this region in twenty years. More than half of them will be closed in less than ten years.

So if that vision I had is of a Uniting Church Congregation, then something will need to change in the days ahead which reverses the current trend and once again sees people brought to Jesus through the ministry which takes place in this very Centre each week. I can't tell you right now what our Church will look like or how it will function for that growth to happen because it wasn't me who said, "*I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*" I thank God every day that I never said that and never needed to say that and never will say that. It was God Who said that, when He dwelt among us in bodily form in the person of Jesus Christ and He is still saying that today through the Holy Spirit.

I have learned the hard way over many years that Jesus was really serious when He said, "*I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*" He really meant it. This is HIS Church and HE is the only One Who will build that Church which will withstand the onslaught from the enemy of God.

Now by inference, He is also saying that any church we build, or attempt to build, even if we do it in His name, such a church will not stand against the powers of darkness and evil in the world. It will not be salt or light anymore. It will not be a transforming influence in the community. It will lose its respect and its position in society and it will become a spent force. Well, welcome to the 21st century Australian Church! *That* is our current reality, by and large.

So my purpose and my calling as a Minister of the Word and God's servant is very simple to see, but incredibly challenging to achieve. It's the same calling and purpose that Jesus had. The same Jesus Who, after His resurrection, stood in the upper room with His disciples and gave them the simple version of the 'great commission' when He said, "*As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.*" *And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* (John. 20:21-22)

So I have the same calling and ministry objective as Jesus and the more I've studied His ministry over the years, the more items I've crossed off my list of plans, expectations, goals, vision and desires for the Church ... until I was left with only one – and that came from Jesus too! It is the world's most simple strategic plan. It is the clearest and most unambiguous goal. It is recorded by John twice in the same chapter of his gospel and I shared it with you in my very first sermon here two years ago. I am referring to John 5:19,30

".. the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing." (John 5:19)

"By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me." (John 5:30)

I no longer want to build the Church like I used to. I simply want to clear the way for Christ to build His Church; a Church that lasts; a Church where people actually encounter God every day – literally, practically, experientially and not just theoretically; a Church that actually impacts the community; a Church that dances to the beat of different drum – God's drum, not the Minister's drum, not the latest secular strategy we might adopt to find a new vision; not the hottest social cause of the day, not some new and exciting ministry we import from another country thinking it's the answer to our struggling little band of disciples.

I want to be part a Church where the Holy Spirit is the wind of God again and where we have the courage to trust the Spirit as we adjust our sails, capture that wind and are not anxious about where it will take us. I want to lead a group of River People again who travel light and follow the river of life anywhere God determines it will go.

Of course, that all sounds so simple doesn't it? Even a little dreamy and romantic! 'We can't direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.' We can sing "Shall we gather at the river" every day if we like, but if we take a closer look at most of the Christian churches in our nation, we will find that the majority of congregations are not spending their time adjusting their sails or preparing for the wind of the Spirit to propel them on to their next Kingdom adventure.

Let me give you another analogy. I was talking to a brother some years ago who used to live in Nelson Bay and we were talking about the many million dollar vessels moored at the marina there and he said some of the owners hold parties on their boats and host sleep-overs there and use them as a luxury motel unit - but they never leave the harbour! How crazy is that? The boat is designed to move, to explore, to not be located in one place for very long. That is its purpose. But many people are too tired or lazy or busy or fearful of the weather and the swell, so they just party at the marina in a boat which may as well be a motel suite on the land.

I laughed as I pondered the sight of people sitting on their upper deck sipping Champaign, and enjoying their luxury surroundings, seemingly oblivious to the fact they were in a vessel which was designed to explore the wonders of the vast ocean!

As I thought about that image, I thought of the church in our great nation and I stopped laughing. Our vessel has been designed by God to be on the move all the time exploring the wonders of God's eternal kingdom - not anchored in the harbour of yesterday or in dry dock sitting on chocks as we forget that it was meant to be in the water!

It's time for the whole Church to understand how we got to the place we are today. As the old cliché goes: *you can't know where you are going until you know where you have been.*

Understanding how we arrived where we find ourselves today, as the 21st Century church in Australia, will be very helpful as we look to God to guide us into the future.

God has now repaired and prepared our buildings for the revival which needs to come. We now need to decide if we will let God prepare our hearts to respond to His call and embrace His 'new day' for us and the Church Jesus wants to build right here. We need to pray every day that God's kingdom will come, here and now, in this very place, and then we are ready to embrace the new day which is dawning.

Let's pray

Come Holy Spirit, bring your wind of renewal, revival and transformation first of all to our hearts, then to our Church, then to our whole community and nation so that Jesus Christ may continue to build His Church in us and among us.

May Your kingdom come and may Your will be done as we let go of yesterday's experience of Church and trust Your Holy Spirit to help us embrace what You are doing today and preparing to do into the future.

We ask this in the name of the One Who is still building His Church, our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.