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Westgate Baptist Community
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Texts: Micah 6:6-8, 2 Corinthians 5:12-21

What are we here for?

Intro:

The 10th of January this year was a pretty special day for me and Elaine. On that day 25 years ago this year we were married in a tiny Methodist Church in Plenty on the northern outskirts of Melbourne. We were pretty young back then, but I think I can proudly say that we haven't missed a single year celebrating that beginning of our marriage in some significant way – in fact on this occasion we went back to the place where we began our honeymoon all those years ago in Launceston, Tasmania. In committed relationships we pause to remember and renew the commitments we made – to think about what started it all and to reflect on the road we have travelled together. Now about the time that good looking young couple was starting out on married life another beginning was taking shape..

Its been twenty-four years since Westgate Baptist Community constituted as a church after the coming together of three smaller Baptist churches around 1980. The church has grown and diminished, it has triumphed and struggled and is it growing again though perhaps in a different way than was envisaged by the group of 40 or so members who were drawn to that early vision. Many friends have come and gone over those years, many people have been blessed and helped, many changes have taken place. And yet that radical vision of the gospel being good news to the poor and a call to radical community in many ways still shapes our life as a Baptist Community of Faith today.

If someone was to ask, “what are you here for?”, I wonder how each of us would answer the question and I wonder how many would refer to that beginning 24 years ago? More interesting to me at least, would be to see how many would answer the question in the light of what it means to be a BAPTIST community of faith?

What does it mean to be part of a Baptist Church? What does it mean to be part of Westgate Baptist Community that stands (at least in name) in that 400 year old tradition of Baptists?

I am proud to be associated with the Baptist Tradition. And though that much maligned term can mean a lot of different things to different people, when I took the time some years ago to discover the nature of that heritage I was convinced that it was something worthwhile and a distinctive expression of Christian identity that has much relevance today.

One word that perhaps capture the essence of that heritage is the word “radical”.

The definition of the adjective, radical refers to “that which relates to or affects the basic nature or most important features of something.”

In 1970's slang the word Radical or RAD (“radical man!”) simply mean something was excellent, admirable, awe-inspiring and very cool.

So radical is something that goes back to the essence, to the roots, to real meaning – and is also really cool!

With this in mind, I want to suggest that in answer to the question, “what are we here for?” as a Baptist Community of Faith it could be summarized in three central themes.

1. To be faithful to a Radical Heritage
- 2. To nurture a radical personal transformation and**
- 3. To nurture a radical engagement with society**

1. To be faithful to a Radical Heritage

I wonder what the average person in the street would imagine when you asked what a Baptist was? More than likely you might get some of these responses..

- Those people who dip people in water.
- Non-drinkers, wowsers, killjoys..
- Southern Baptist USA evangelicals, red-neck fundos, Billy Graham, TV evangelists
- That denomination associated with famous Baptists like Martin Luther King and Tim Costello!
- In the ‘burbs you might get an answer that indicates that big church down the road that’s into music, families and entertaining preaching and corny slogans and nice cars in the car park – all characteristics of most evangelical protestant churches in Melbourne.

What then are the distinctives of the Baptist heritage?

We need to go back to the beginnings of the tradition in the 17th century to get a gist of what were the practices and convictions of those early Baptists in England which, whether we like it or not, is the roots from which the Australian and for that matter, the Karen and Chin Baptist expressions of Christianity grew.

It all started with a bloke with the highly unusual name of John Smyth in 1609. John Smyth was the pastor of one of the so-called Separatist churches who refused to be told what to think and believe by the recently formed State Church of England which really wasn’t very different to the Catholic Church controlled by Rome. They were convinced with other separatist groups that the Bible and not the King or the Pope was the ultimate source of authority in faith and practice and they were prepared to face imprisonment, exile and economic oppression to be true to that conviction.

John Smyth and his congregation of 36 dissenters were in fact in exile in Amsterdam when he came to the conclusion that the Bible taught that the true church was a community of people who had individually made a covenant with God through the conscious act of baptism and identification with Christ. And so they declared their infant baptism as invalid and were all baptised as a sign of their conviction and thus the first Baptist church was born and the nickname stuck.

Its hard for us in this age of religious pluralism to imagine what it must have been like for those first Baptists. We do not live in an age of a state religious hierarchy who can persecute you for acting or thinking differently from the official line. In recent years though, there has been a taste of this perhaps in the new political correctness that can in certain circles create a lot of abuse and discomfort to those who dare question the official line on certain issues.

For example, if you question the validity of Australia’s involvement in the invasion and occupation of Iraq you are accused of supporting terrorists.

Or if you question the government's cruel and inhumane asylum seeker policies, you are accused of wanting to let in terrorists.

Or if you question the harsh new laws that allow for the imprisonment of people without charge you are accused of supporting terrorists.

But at least at this stage you are not put into prison in Australia for disagreeing with the Government... but of course there are people here today who have experienced this very thing in Burma and perhaps for them it is not hard to imagine what it may have been like for those early dissenting Baptist leaders.

So what did the Baptists stand for? What is the distinctive pattern of faith that we have inherited from these early non-conformists?

Well it could be summarized in a list of 7 convictions..

1. The **centrality of the Bible** as the supreme witness for ascertaining the authority of God in faith and practice.
2. The church as the **gathering of believers, baptised and covenanted** to God and to each other.
3. The Gospel must be believed and **shared**.
4. The **freedom of each person** to form his or her own position in matters of faith.
5. The **freedom of the local church** to order itself but **not in isolation**.
6. The duty of Christians to **work for the betterment of National Life**.
7. The duty of Christians to accept and obey **new truth breaking out of the scriptures**.

Without going into the detail of each of these convictions – I think they could be summarized by saying that those early Baptists believed strongly that the Christian life was about a living relationship with God that was expressed through a person's: individual faith and commitment to community, and, their radical engagement with society and a challenging of the powers that be in the light of the Biblical witness.

Another way of putting this is to speak (as Marcus Borg does) of the two transformations that are at the heart of the Christian faith.

A transformation is a word that basically means a complete and profound change from one thing to a better thing.

So the two transformations at the heart of the Christian life are: the individual, spiritual, personal and the communal, social, political.

As the quote on the front of the Messenger puts it:

The Biblical understanding of salvation is both personal and political.
It is about both the individual and society, both spiritual and social.
It concerns us as persons; it is about our relationship with God as individuals.

And it is also about politics, about our life together as societies, about justice - about political, social and economic (and environmental) justice.

So to be faithful to the radical heritage of the early Baptists we need to be engaged in these two dimensions of what it means to be Christian in the time we find ourselves in.

**We need to be nurturing a radical personal transformation
and
We need to be nurture a radical engagement with society**

Lets take just a brief look at each of these two essential expressions of our Christian faith and community..

2. To Nurture a Radical Transformation.

Paul speaks about this in a different set of words we read earlier..

17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; **19** that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. **20** So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

There are many different pictures or metaphors of this radical personal tranformation in the Bible. Being Born Again is how John puts it and there is also many references to dying and rising with Christ and here the idea of reconciliation is used to describe what Christ was on about.

I love this idea of reconciliation with God. Why? because the beauty of that word reconciliation implies that there is an existing relationship that needs to be restored.

This idea is so central to the Christian faith but unfortunately has got lost a bit over the years when many Christians imagined a God separated and cut off from the world..

But at the heart of the transformation that needs to take place in hearts and lives at the deepest personal level is a relization that our lives are totally dependent on God whether we know it or not.

In an effort to describe this need for re-connection for reconciliation Borg tells the following story.. he heard about a three-year-old girl.´

She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby's room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby's room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room, imagined her standing over the baby's crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, "Tell me about God I've almost forgotten."

The story is both haunting and evocative, for it suggests that we come from God, and that when we are very young, we still remember this, still know this. But the process of growing up, of learning about this world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live. The birth and intensification of self-consciousness, of self-awareness, involves a separation from God.

We have all experienced this. It cannot be avoided; and it is part of being human. But the problem is that self awareness and self-consciousness become increasingly shaped by the culture we live in which at present is a culture that encourages individualism and self-referencing to an extreme all-defining thing.

Thus we need to be born again. As Marcus Borg puts it..

It is the road of return from our exile, the way to recover our true self, the path of beginning to live our lives from the inside out rather than from the outside in, the exodus from our individual and collective selfishness. To be born again involves dying to the false self., to that identity, to that way of being, and to be born in to an identity centred in the Spirit, in Christ , in God. It is the process of internal redefinition of the self whereby a real person is born within us.

For some this can be a single intense experience, a conversion. But the majority of us it is a gradual incremental process of being re-connected, be re-centred on God the source of life, love and purpose in our lives.

So what we are on about here at Westgate Baptist Community is being a community of midwives. That is, realising that only the Spirit of God can bring about this transformation in our individual lives but we can assist the process by helping each other be open and intentional about this re-connection with God.

But being re-connected with God means being re-connected with God's heart and all throught the Bible we see a God who is passionately concerned about Justice and who is partisan on the side of the poor and the voiceless.

We see the two dimensions of the personal and the political in those profound and life shaping words of the profit Micah. "What does our God require of us but to Do Justice, To Love Kindness and to Walk Humbly with our God."

Thus the other transformation that is essential to the expression of Christian life in keeping with our heritage is ...

3. To nurture a radical engagement with society

For those early Baptists, this meant to live in community and to challenge the powers that be in working toward the vision of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a New Testament idea that is shorthand for God's passion for a world of justice and love where right relationships, the rule of peace and equal sharing of resources are the characteristics of a society.

We are called in our time to participate and work for the vision of the Kingdom of God in our time.

So what does this mean? How are we to participate in this transformation of society?

There is a wonderful essay that appears in the October edition of the Monthly Magazine, by Kevin Rudd – the shadow minister of Foreign Affairs. Kevin is a practicing Catholic who has recently argued for the re-claiming of the Christian Voice as the voice of a rich social justice tradition and not just another group supporting the right wing agenda of the so-called neo conservatives in power in Australia and America at the present time.

Rudd argues in this very readable article that the model for how Christians should engage with the state can be found in the life and witness of the German theologian, pastor and peace activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who is without doubt, he says, the man he admires most in the history of the twentieth century.

Bonhoeffer lived through the rise of Nazi Germany and the systematic persecution and destruction of the European Jewish communities and he saw his role in the spirit of Biblical tradition to be a voice for the voiceless – in this case the Jews. And he spoke and acted against the murderous policies of the state which in the end cost him his life..

In this tradition, Rudd argues, the function of the church in all areas of social, economic and security policy is to speak directly to the state: to give power to the powerless, a voice to those who have none, and to point to the great silence in our national discourse.

Let me quote a bit of the essay.. p28-29

So whether is speaking out against de-humanizing polices of the state, or being a voice for the voiceless and suffering earth, the task is the same – to be engaged in the transformation of society as an equal part of the mission of God.

IN conclusion then, to answer the question what are we here for? WE can proudly say that we stand in a long tradition of a radical heritage of Christian faith and practice that holds two profound transformations at the heart of its life..

That is we exist here as a community of faith in the Baptist tradition...

To nurture a Radical personal and spiritual re-birth and reconnection with God.

And to nurture a Radical engagement with society that means we will always be looking to be a voice of voiceless and the marginalized..

May God strengthen us and empower us to engage in this wonderful and profound vision as individuals and as Westgate Baptist Community in this next year and in the years to come.

Amen.