'What I am learning’. ‘What I value about the Baptist tradition’

Text: Isaiah 43:18-21

‘I am about to do a new thing’

This reading might seem a little curious for an induction of a professor of Baptist studies. ‘Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old’. Don’t we want people to have a sense of history, to know something about the past? Of course, we do. I do.

The prophet Isaiah holds too firmly to the traditions of his people to dismiss the events of old. He is telling the exiles not to look back mournfully into the past like people who have no hope for the future. Yahweh’s saving acts have not come to an end. He asks the Hebrew people not to dwell on the mistakes and devastation of the past as if they were to have the final word but to look forward to something new; the promise of hope and new possibilities that Yahweh, their Redeemer, Liberator would do for them. In their worship, their festivals, their Sabbath, the Hebrew people regularly reminded themselves of the God who was faithful to them in the past; who brought them out of bondage into a promised land. The Lord is doing something new. Don’t the people experience it in the continuous movement of history? Yahweh will lead the Hebrew people through the desert once more, but through a different route and in a different way and with what purpose? That they might retell the acts of God as history runs on. . . They have a part to play in making known Yawheh’s acts in history. Now it is time to look to what God will do in their future.

As we begin a new year in the theological college, we do so in the Year of Mark, a year themed Faith and Ministry. This year also marks 150 years of faith and ministry in the Baptist Union of Victoria. There is much to give thanks for, there are things to confess, and there are hopes for the future.

‘To be mindful of the past and be open to the future’

So it is we study the past in order to understand better our identity, where we have come from, to whom we belong and how we might move into the future with hope, and promise, even with confidence.

In our communities today, there are those who struggle to access their own history or whose history has been torn from them – members of the Stolen Generation, Adopted children, mothers whose children have been taken for adoption . . .

In their history Baptists have shown themselves to be people of strong convictions and commitments, many of which they have shared with Christians of other traditions.

Baptists affirm the centrality of scripture as interpreted by the gathered community under Christ. Salvation by grace through faith; believers’ baptism by immersion; a regenerate church membership; congregational polity; the priesthood of all believers; separation of church and state; the individual’s capacity for direct access to God.

Regrettably Baptists have also shown themselves to be fractious and intolerant of each other and of others - people of an independent spirit with every Baptist having a voice. The vision of a Baptist in America burning copies of the Qu’ran publicly is
distressing and horrifying, Many Baptists cringe at the sight of that. Baptists have fallen out over other things as well. To be able to disagree and hold different views passionately while maintaining fellowship with one another is not always easy. It requires grace and humility and the willingness to acknowledge that perhaps ‘The Lord God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word’ (as the old hymn goes). Or to use the words of Yahweh in the Prophet Isaiah: ‘I am yet to do something new’. 

As Professor of Baptist Studies, it is one of my roles to help and encourage those undertaking formal or informal study of the Baptist tradition through the College and the Historical Society to become more aware of our forbears, warts and all, to recognize that Baptists have something valuable to bring to the table; that we are indeed part of the Body of Christ, but not the whole part. In our study, we uncover stories of inspiration and faith, courage and hope; as well as the inevitable mistakes, deception and blindness.

This requires a humility, a decent grasp on reality and a sense of humour. Some years ago when I was undertaking PhD studies at the University of Melbourne, a young post graduate student in the Gender Studies Department asked me what my thesis was about. I replied: ‘The impact of social change and secularization upon Victorian Baptists since 1960.’ ‘Oh’, she said, ‘that sounds really interesting’. I wasn’t confident at that point that she knew much about Baptists, and this was confirmed when she added: ‘Baptists - they’re like Buddhists, aren’t they?’

We don’t want to take ourselves too seriously nor do we want to underestimate the contribution of Baptists to the broader Christian community. I think that Baptists are at their best when they humbly recognize the distinctive contribution that they can make while welcoming and not disparaging the voices and contribution of those from other Christian communities and faith traditions.

My own life experience and research has revealed the truth of those insights. Serving for many years in an inner city ecumenical Christian community (the House of the Gentle Bunyip) helped me appreciate the commitment and insights of those who do not claim the Baptist tradition for themselves. I appreciated their dedication, creativity, and tolerance of some of us. Here in the Melbourne College of Divinity, we give thanks for the insights of colleagues and friends from other colleges who are committed to the Gospel and to training women and men for service in church and society.

Three years ago Baptists celebrated 400 years - the first baptisms of believers in Amsterdam, Holland. Not such a long history in the whole scheme of things maybe but some things to be valued and not lost.

50 years ago, when Victorian Baptists made the new college their centenary project, and appointed a Welsh Baptist as their Principal, they discovered quickly that, in the person of Mervyn Himbury and others, Yahweh was indeed about to do a new thing – A college in a university precinct, men preparing for the ministry in a university residential community with men studying engineering, the arts, architecture and so on – non-believers many of them, or the ‘great unwashed’ as Mervyn Himbury referred to them. He loved them. Later women entered the college. This new thing was not to everybody’s liking.

Principal Himbury named the principal’s residence, Helwys House. This year Baptists around the world will remember with thankfulness the contribution of Thomas Helwys, one of the members of that founding group of Baptists in
Holland – people of courage and commitment who formed covenanted communities of believers committed to Scripture, believers’ baptism, religious freedom, a high view of the church. Helwys later became a leader of the first English Baptists and established a Baptist church at Spittalfields outside London. He was a lawyer, who spent a good part of his life in prison, as did his wife. They used their resources to help fund the exodus of John Smyth’s congregation of religious refugees to Amsterdam a few years earlier.

In 1612 Helwys wrote to the King of England, James 1 (who commissioned the Authorized Version of the Bible and believed in the divine right of kings). The book was entitled, ‘The Mystery of Iniquity’. It is a plea for religious liberty for all – heretics, Turks (Muslims) Jews of whatsoever based on a serious searching of the scriptures.

Helwys argued that there was a limit to the king’s authority. Christ alone is King. The king has no power over his subject’s consciences. Men should choose their own religion because in the end, they must make an answer to God the Judge.

In his society in which kings believed they had been endowed with the divine right, Thomas Helwys, taking his lead from Jesus who challenged the religious and economic institutions of his day, dared to affirm that Christ alone is King. This was dangerous and seditious writing at a time when Church and State were so closely linked and led to Helwys imprisonment and death a few short years later.

Helwys did not know that what he and his little group were doing, would shape the life, faith and witness of future generations and countless individuals and communities.

In the same way, none of us knows how our small efforts might contribute to the future of our churches, communities, society or the planet. The prophet Isaiah spoke words of great faith when he reminded the people of Yahweh’s vision:

‘I am about to do a new thing’

As Professor of Baptist Studies it is part of my role to help select and guide candidates for the ordained Baptist ministry in the churches of the BUV. I do this as part of a committed team of people. It is wonderful to welcome Anne Mallaby this year. Preparing people for ministry in church and society is a great privilege and a considerable responsibility. You may not be preparing for ordained ministry, but if you are undertaking studies here, you are in the process of equipping yourselves for service in the church and society. Baptists have always valued the contribution of church members – the lifeblood of the church. You are engaged in the process of discovering how God will do a new thing in your life and in the life of your faith communities. You bring your own story and history and as you engage in an open and committed community of study and scholarship, you will be shaped further and you will help to shape others.

Baptists have always had a commitment to mission – evangelism and often that has included social justice. Baptists are a global community – we celebrate the multicultural nature of Baptist life. Here in Victoria, we are greatly enriched by people from all parts of the globe. As a Union of Churches and as a College, we are enriched by students from Baptists communities from several parts of the globe - women and men who have left their home countries sometimes reluctantly and under duress to find a new home, to create a new future to test the truth of Yahweh’s words in Isaiah:

‘I am about to do a new thing’
We deny the truth of those words when we move away from freedom in Christ to a strait-jacketed view of faith, church and ministry where man-made structures determine who is welcome, who serves and who leads among us. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we fail to welcome the gifts of the Spirit, to recognize the new things that God is doing among us.

**Approaching the past:**
It is important to approach the past with wisdom, humility and discernment: not to live in the past or to ignore its impact upon us. Not to view the past through rose-coloured glasses or try to recapture the past although that may help us feel more secure and comfortable in the present. One of the realities that has become increasingly obvious, is that life is full of change, and the pace of change is increasing exponentially. This is not a reason for overturning or dismantling the traditions. In order to deal with rapid change, it is important to have some good processes in place, some structures that are flexible to bend, not break. It is not always life-giving to be in constant free fall.

Nor does a fictionalized view of the past, one not based in reality, help us deal with human sinfulness, frailty, weakness and limitations.

'*I am doing a new thing*':
The recently acclaimed silent film, *The Artist* depicts the story of a successful silent movie actor in the 1920s overtaken by the phenomenon of spoken movies. Failing to acknowledge the new day, the actor clings to the old. No longer in demand, he sets out to produce, direct and star in a silent film. But it is a spectacular failure and stands in stark contrast to the new phenomenon of talking films starring a young beautiful female actress who previously played a support role in the actor’s own silent movies. Confronted with failure and a forlorn future, the actor steadily descends into poverty, obscurity and loneliness until he concludes that the only solution is to take his own life. Thanks however, to the quick actions of his faithful, smart little dog and the female film star who has a great respect for him because he gave her a start in acting but has subsequently supplanted him in popularity, he eventually survives.

(I won’t give the ending away.)

'*My debt to the past*'
I want to honour those who have gone before me and pay tribute to what they have contributed to my life. If we cannot honour the past, we cannot live honourably in the present (said my colleague Rev Roslyn Wright). H Richard Niebuhr said that ‘we are in history and history is in us’ and that whether we recognize it or not. Our very bodies testify to that. What we have inherited physically, psychologically or mentally is only all too obvious – eg the way we walk, smile, our build and sense of humour.

I want to acknowledge this college whose principals past and present have a particular love of the Baptist story at its best- Mervyn Himbury, Ken Manley (who has devoted much of his life to documenting the story of Baptists, particularly Australian Baptists), Geoff Pound (now serving in Saudi Arabia who shared his love of F W Boreham with the rest of) and Frank Rees whose love of good theology and commitment to the churches of the BUV is well-known.

Basil Brown passed away last year. He loved the Baptist story and documented much of it.
Athol Gill was inspired by Mark’s Gospel and a vision of the mission of the church among the poor and dispossessed. The 20th anniversary of his death falls this coming Friday.
We don’t want to underestimate the importance of faith communities, and of what the Baptist tradition can contribute to the well-being of society.

This was underlined for me in a recent interview with Alain de Botton, philosopher, writer, author of *Religion for Atheists*. De Botton spoke about the importance of religion. He said that some prominent atheists have unhelpfully caricatured religion. Science does not give us consolation or meaning. Religion is useful, complex and intelligent. He mentioned the special days and times set aside in the calendars of many world religions to reflect on central themes such as the Day of Atonement in Judaism.

De Botton said that churches have a great deal of offer – places of community, an ethical framework, education, guidance, recognition of awe (mystery), the reminder that we are not perfect. Churches provide places of community in a fractured world where people can receive help to face the big hurdles of life when the secular world leaves us on our own to face life’s challenges. De Botton asks whether anything has adequately replaced the monasteries – those places of silence and contemplation and suggests that if we are not spending half an hour a day in silence, we might be in trouble. For it is in these places that we talk to the deepest parts of ourselves. We call this prayer. I would say that here we find God.

At the beginning of a new college year, let’s take heed of De Botton’s wise observations. Be encouraged and challenged by them. Along with others, we have something important to bring to the table. Our college has a vital role to play in that process. I pray that this year, the Year of Mark’s Gospel, the year of Faith and Ministry, you and I will discover in fresh and exciting ways the truth of Yahweh’s proclamation in Isaiah’s prophetic message:

‘Look, I am about to do a new thing’

‘Be mindful of the past and be open to the future’