

Last Saturday we gathered with around 30-40 others to put Julie Blair's mother Jenny's ashes in the ground. They ashes were placed in front of a gravestone with its own interesting history. This place will remind those who knew Jenny - of her life, her marriage, her family, her friends and interests; looking back, not to be stuck in time, but looking back in order to live forward with positive memories.

It's very much like Jacob's action after Rachel died.

¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).²⁰ Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb.

Looking back - a stone, a reminder and in later times a name or remembering the past.

Inevitably, I've spent time recently looking back, the lot of nearly retired people - looking back to standing by the piano at Nelson Baptist on a Sunday night when I was 16. The pastor said he felt the Lord was going to call me into some form of Christian Ministry and a seed was planted. That seed was watered by others, watered by opportunities given and affirmation received.

I also look back to the sunny afternoon standing on the stairs at Trudy's lovely family home in Timaru. That afternoon she told me she wasn't going to pursue a career as a missionary or missionary-teacher after all, but she was going to do the much harder thing, marry me. And marry on the understanding that after we'd fulfilled our teaching obligations to the government, we would apply to go to what was then Baptist College, now Carey College.

After we left Auckland, we enjoyed not quite 7 very pleasant years in Ashburton. When we began there, my sister sent us this picture, which now hangs in our living room. It seemed to symbolize new possibilities, that's how we feel today but without the energy of 1977.



Looking back may be maudlin navel gazing if it's not looking back to live forward. Jeremiah raised this issue with the nation of Israel. I've spoken from this text before - the first time was just over 35 years ago.

Jeremiah 6:16

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'

Looking back to live forward, especially at those moments where there are several directions you could go in. It's best to look where you've come from: what's the tried and tested path; where the good (possibly the best) is and walk in it.

If you do this, you'll find rest for your souls. Now we do need to understand that 'rest' in biblical terms isn't lying on a beach on some exotic island with not a care in the world.

Rest is the place of contentment, service and harmony with God's purposes - or as Frederick Buechner so beautifully puts it, 'the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.'

To walk the good way, to find rest is to be where God would have us be, where God would have us live, where God would have us serve, where God would have us love, worship and live.

And God's people then said NO! And the great majority of the descendants of Jeremiah's time are still saying no. He encourages us to look back in order to live forward.

As we look back on our years of living out Jesus' call the ancient path for us has some wonderful components. God's provision, God's grace in difficult times; God's comfort in sorrow; and those times when the Lord has worked sovereignly beyond our understanding -that's how it seems. Then there are the people who've blessed us in so many ways along the road - so many are here. As we have a change of status, a change of focus, a change of how we use our days in a sense nothing has changed. We'll look back in order to live forward.

A bit like Samuel did:

Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us.'

As Samuel moved into the future, he could look on that stone and remember how the Lord had helped in the past.

It's not a negative thing - we look back to enable us to live forward. Now, can you hold that thought as we take this a step further - hold it in your bag, your pocket, your mind - wherever?

If we were following the readings in many churches today, they will be reading from Luke 4:

Luke 4:14-21: Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

When Jesus took the opportunity to declare the shape and content of his life, he went back to the Old Testament to find the best expression of how he would serve and live. He looked back to words written possibly 700 years earlier. Note how this text describes what Jesus would do?

His was a life empowered by the Holy Spirit:

- To proclaim good news and freedom for those imprisoned by whatever shape or form that imprisonment was
- To enable the blind to see - not just a physical thing is it?
- To set oppressed free
- To say, to proclaim its time

And then he set about living it forward - **'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'** In the future, this is what will happen. Looking back to live forward.

What about us? Don't we look back to the gospels, to the Bible, to the life and times of Jesus? But we're not caught in a time warp. We don't learn and speak the languages the New Testament was written in - that is except for Yanni and Toula.

We look back to the record of the living Jesus and his saving work in order to live forward. We know about this because somebody passed it on to us - a parent, a friend, a Sunday school teacher, a youth group leader, a pastor or a speaker.

For those here who follow Jesus, someone helped you to look back and claim your spiritual inheritance in order that you might live forward and see each day as an adventure.

So here we are at the end of one stage of our spiritual journey. I was explaining to someone last Sunday that I look back on my life, on our life together, both in terms of seasons and chapters and books. We're beginning a new chapter; more likely a new book and we're entering a new season - we've got some great examples of those who've gone before. As we look forward what, from our experience and life, will guide us into living forward.

I've identified three for myself and lined them up with a scriptural principle - there are many I could have chosen, and I realize I could be setting myself up for failure. I want to place three bold strokes on the canvas and let you consider your lives in the light of them.

I Living Passionately

I realize that some who would like to live passionately may not be able to because of the limits of health and mobility. But passion doesn't necessarily involve physical strength or the ability to go places. Passion comes from the sense that you've been found, or you've found what it is that gives you meaning and purpose. Despite the many limitations of recent years Elsie Clark was passionate about prayer and Christian living. I feel we're already missing her prayers and we loved hearing what the good people at Frances Hodgkins said about her.

Philippians 3: What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

There's obviously a lot in this that could be said - what I love here is Paul's passion. I want to know Christ. In the light of last Sunday, I'd probably say I want to know Jesus, but Paul used terms interchangeably and let's face it he was Jewish.

II Letting go in order to run well

Hebrews 12: Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

It's been my privilege over the last 35 years to share in the life celebrations of many of these witnesses.

People who've run the race, thrown off what doesn't matter, dealt with their sins/failings and got on with it. Running, moving - the stationary Christian is a Christian whose life and witness is going nowhere; and that's the challenge for Trudy and me; throw away the role, the status, the position, the set idea of what we should be and do and get running, although to be fair in our case that probably means gently strolling - and I'm sure God understands.

III Learning to love whenever, wherever and however

Colossians 3: Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**.¹³ **Bear with each other and forgive one another** if any of you has a grievance against someone. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you**.¹⁴ **And over all these virtues put on love**, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

I'd like to get back to where we were at the start of last year; not sure if we got it then. The five habits of a highly missional person

As people seeking to follow Jesus we are to be those who:

Bless people - not always within this community or those like us

Eat food with those who are not always within this community or those like us

Learn Jesus

Be **Led** by the Spirit

Keep a record of where the Lord **Sends** you

How?

Live passionately

Let go

Love in all its various shapes and forms

And on that note, I rest my case.