

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Navigating life's journey

Presented by Bob Smith

Hebrews 13:1-14

One of the oldest and most enduring images of the Christian life is that of a journey; a journey through this brief and transient life to our true destiny in the eternal Kingdom of God. This journey has two aspects both of which run simultaneously. One is our outward journey of service – what we accomplish. The other is our inward journey of growth – what we are. One of the most important factors in a successful journey is effective navigation. If the journey is a simple road trip the task is not terribly difficult. But if it takes us through a wilderness or across a featureless ocean the process is more complex.

For road navigation all we need is a map. For navigating across an ocean you need a chart and compass. The chart gives the essential information about the course to follow, and the compass enables us to translate that information into a specific direction. In our journey of life our chart is all those things that God has revealed to us about this life journey through the Scriptures and the accumulated wisdom and experience of humankind. Supreme amongst these are the teachings and example of Jesus. Our compass is our capacity to discern and apply that revelation to our personal journey. It includes understanding, wisdom and conscience. So, with all this in mind, let us start plotting our course for what lies before us.

The first step in plotting our life course is to identify where we are now. I once nearly sailed a yacht onto a coral reef in the Whitsunday Islands. My wife and I set out from our anchorage at Nara Inlet for a day's sailing to Butterfly Bay. I had consulted the chart before setting out and planned the course we would follow. Part of it meant threading our way through 4 small islands and a large area of coral. When we reached that point my wife stood up on the bow watching the water ahead for coral. Suddenly she yelled out "rocks ahead." We were sailing right over the reef. The only escape into deep water was to turn directly into the wind. She ran below and started the engine, which fortunately fired first time, while I spun the wheel, and with our sails flapping and only inches of water below our keel, we motored into deeper water and eventually found the channel.

It was then that I realized what had gone wrong. I had studied our chart and had followed it except for one thing. I had incorrectly identified the positions of those small islands shown on the chart. One of them, from my line of sight, had merged into the bigger island behind it and consequently I got them mixed up. It was a simple error, based on inexperience and the failure to observe the first and most basic step in navigation – being absolutely sure of where you are before you set your new course.

This leads to the first question we must ask ourselves as we journey on through life. Where are we now - on our outward journey of service and our inward journey of growth. Navigators can only fix their position by reference to some other fixed object: a landmark, the position of the sun, or an orbiting satellite. Likewise, in our journey of life we can only determine where we are now by reference to something else we know to be true. Ultimately, of course, that means God's will for our lives. But how do we determine exactly what that

is? We know where to find the overall principles of course. They are in the teachings and example of Jesus. But what about the specifics of our lives?

Well, I believe the answer to that is written within our own hearts. Think carefully, when was the last time you really felt strongly that God was saying something to you about what you are meant to do in life and what you are meant to be inwardly. Well, that is your point of reference for determining where you are now. Compare your life now with that insight you once had and you will know where you are now. If your answer is that you have not had such an experience, but what I am saying right now touches a responsive chord within you, then it may be that this very moment is it for you. What you sensed then, or sense now, is the point of reference that will tell you where you are now.

Once you know where you are and what your final destination is, it's relatively easy to plot the course you need to take to get there. I remember my first navigation exercise with the Army. Six of us were dropped at a certain point and then given a very precise map reference and told to navigate our way to it. If we got it right we would find a small trigonometric marker. The first thing we had to do was to establish where we were. It took a while but we finally located our position on the map by identifying a small billabong and its bearing from what seemed to us to be the highest peaks on the mountain range. From that point we worked out the true compass bearing to the map position we were to reach, made adjustments for the difference between true north and magnetic north and worked out that it was about 3 kms away. We picked the soldier with the longest legs and organized him to count the paces as we went. Then we set off, following the compass bearing we'd set. After 3000 paces we knew we were close. We were scrambling up a very steep hill through thick undergrowth. Finally we got to the top and there, almost directly in front of me, was a small trig marker cemented into the rock. My navigation had worked to within 2 metres of that marker. I was quite elated. As we all are when we look back over a period of our life's journey and realize that the direction we decided to go has taken us to where we wanted to be.

And, once again, the key to setting an accurate course is the memory of that insight about our life's purpose that once we received, however hazy it may have been.

Dr Paul Tournier wrote about this in a wonderful book called 'The Adventure of Living'. His thesis was that at the centre of each of us there is a drive for adventure – for our lives to be spent for something that, for us, has real meaning. This adventure may take many forms, but essentially it comes down to one of two types – the quality adventure or the quantity adventure. The quality adventure is what our innermost beings tell us we most want our lives to be lived for. But there is a problem with this. There is always a price to pay. A price that many of us are not prepared to pay. So we opt for the quantity adventure instead. We try to make up in quantity for what we have lost in quality – usually material things, comfort, prestige etc; which is all very well except it leaves us empty inside. It is that sense of what the quality adventure is for us that gives us our destination to which we plot our course. The trick then is to determine what we must do to get there, what our priorities must be, and what self disciplines we must apply to follow them.

In navigating life's journey, we need to be aware of things that may deflect us from our true course. Navigators call this compass error. A compass is affected by the Earth's magnetic field, and so it points to Magnetic North rather than True North, which is what maps are aligned to. This is called compass variation and is the same for all compasses. Navigators have to be careful to make allowance for it. On a yacht the difficulty is complicated further by what is known as compass deviation. This is specific to each individual boat compass. It's caused by the metal in the boat's keel, engine and fixtures. These also affect the magnetic compass and cause it to deviate further from True North. Every boat compass is different. So navigators have to know what their individual compass's degree of deviation is to make allowances for it in setting their course.

In our journey of life, if we think of our compass being our faculties for discerning God's will, there are two forms of compass error to bear in mind. Like compass variation, we are all subject to influences that seek to pull us away from where our lives were meant to be. Jesus referred to it in the Parable of the Sower. He talked about some seed falling amongst thorns, and even though it grew it never reached its potential because it was forever competing with the thorns for the soil's nourishment. Jesus described these thorns as the 'the cares of this World and the deceitfulness of riches.' Those two factors, probably more than anything else, keep good people from being their best – worry, that means they always play it safe and never venture forth; and an excessive attachment to the idea that life is to be found in accumulating things.

We are also subject to our own form of compass deviation, and, as on a yacht, this is specific to each individual, caused by factors peculiar to our own personalities. The Bible talks about the need to have 'a sober, or realistic, estimate of ourselves...neither thinking too highly of ourselves, or too lowly.' Some of us have too high an opinion of ourselves and thereby fail to grasp what Jesus meant when he said that we find our lives as we adopt a servant mentality. On the other hand, some of us have too low an opinion of ourselves and constantly castigate ourselves with the feeling that we are not doing enough, or we are not being good enough. We forget that we are not called to save the world, but simply to bear witness by life, word and deed to the one who is the Saviour of the World. Both of these can cause us to deviate from our God appointed course; one by the apathy of an under-active conscience, the other by the paralysis of an over-active conscience.

It's important to stop, every now and then, and take stock of our lives and measure our performance along life's journey to see if we are still on course in those two basic areas of our pilgrimage – what we are meant to do, and what we are meant to be. And that is a simple matter of basic navigation principles. First, with reference to what our own hearts tell us that we are meant to be and do, we work out where we are now. We take our minds back to that time when we did know, and from that we fix our present position.

Then, having done that, we work out what we need to do to stay on course, or to get back on course. Our own hearts will tell us how to do it.

Third, we make sure we are aware of those influences that confuse our inner compass – things that are common to us all, and things that are specific to us.

Finally, if we are still not clear, we should remember those words at the beginning of the Epistle of James; "If any of you need wisdom, you should ask God, and it will be given to you...but when you ask...you must have faith and not doubt."

Lord God, grant us the wisdom to clearly identify where we are on our life journey, the insight to know where you want us to be, and the courage to do what we need to do to get there. Amen.