**STEP OUT IN FAITH – future directions for the parish.**

There’s a little story in Matthew chapter 9 that goes like this….

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"

When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" "Yes, Lord," they replied.

Then he touched their eyes and said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"; and their sight was restored.

Amongst the many things we could glean from this little story is the value of faith. The Knox translation of the last verse says, “Jesus touched their eyes and said, ‘Your faith will not be disappointed.’ ”

In this context, the men’s faith was in Jesus’ ability to heal them – and their faith was not disappointed. They went away with their sight completely restored.

Jesus exhorted his followers to exercise their faith:

Mat\_17:20 He replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Mat\_21:22 If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Mar\_11:24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

During the week, Marie sent me one of the little commentaries we often read in the pewsheet. It was about faith. It said this:

"The size of the pond determines the size of the fish. Similarly, little ideas in little-thinking minds produce little achievements. But little ideas embraced by big-thinking minds produce enormous achievements.' Jesus said, 'According to your faith be it unto you.' The size of your faith and your vision determines the outcome of your idea.  Ronald E. Osborn said, 'Undertake something difficult; it will do you good. Unless you try something beyond what you have already mastered, you'll never grow.' You attain in direct proportion to what you attempt, which is why Jesus said to His disciples: 'Launch out into the deep.' - twft

I’m beginning with a pep-talk on faith this morning, because as I shared some months ago, I believed that as a parish, we were at something of a crossroads. Often when we find ourselves in that place, and we are looking to God to show us the way forward, we will be asked to exercise faith - because God rarely gives us the whole picture of our future in a clearly laid out blueprint. If he did that, there would be no need for us to trust him.

***At this point in time, as a parish, we have been presented with an exciting opportunity which requires that we step out in faith. So, it’s a little bit scary…***

Before I elaborate, allow me to remind us of our journey as a church over the last eighteen months or so.

At the beginning of last year, when we engaged Anita Harris as our youth and family worker, we had the opportunity to begin a couple of new ministries in the church. We started a contemporary service called “Living Faith. A group of young people from Bateman’s Bay came down each week to help with the service and it was a lively and encouraging ministry.

Last year, Anita and I also began a Mainly Music group for mums and toddlers in Bodalla. It was a fruitful ministry for a time, and so we started a similar group in Narooma at the beginning of this year.

Then towards the end of first term this year, we started to see a shift in these ministries we’d been involved in. The Mainly Music group at Bodalla dwindled. The problem wasn’t the program, or the people running it – it was simply the way such things tend to go in a small community. In a year or so, we’ll be able to offer it again, when some more mums are looking for a music opportunity for their children.

Then Living Faith also wound down. We got to the stage where it was only the team who were coming each week, so we decided to put the service into recess until God led us to reinstate it.

At the same time as these ministries began to wind down, Anita was feeling an increasing call to move to the Batemans Bay area so she could devote more time to the young people’s ministry she was involved in there.

So by Easter this year, the landscape had changed. Bodalla Mainly Music and Living Faith in Narooma were no longer happening and Anita let us know she was leaving.

**You’ll remember I posed a question – “where to now?”** When we are faced with change - in this case attrition - we have two options: We can simply adjust to the change and just carry on in our newly diminished state or we can look to God to use the opportunity to show us new directions in which we might move; to ask “Lord, what would you have us do at this time? Is there some other opportunity you would have us embrace?”

To help us discern what God would have us do, people from the parish were invited to meet on Thursday mornings for an hour to seek God’s face and to listen. We prayed for our existing ministries, we prayed for revival among us and in our community, and we prayed for God to guide us in whatever direction he would have us take. Undergirding our prayers was the knowledge that our call as Christians is to share God’s love with others, and invite them into his Kingdom.

The next thing that happened was that we received a phone call from the Harrises saying that now that Anita had moved out, they wanted to sell their house. (For those who might be visiting, the Harris’s house shares a boundary with St Paul’s Narooma. It’s right next door.) The parish had requested a long time ago that we be given the first option to purchase the house should it ever go up for sale. So even before I came, there has been an awareness that a property next door to the church might provide great opportunities for ministry, should the parish ever be able to swing it.

Significant, isn’t it, that this should come up while we are fervently praying for direction for the future of the parish! So then the prayer group became more specific in their prayers. “Lord, is this something you would have the parish pursue?”

There was much discussion as to the pros and cons of such a move. But as we listened, shared scriptures, and what we felt God was saying to us, there was a sense from many in the group that this would be a good thing to do. There were a couple in the group with reservations of course – and that is always healthy. It helps us keep our feet on the ground and look at a possibility from all angles.

We then needed to see whether this was at all “do-able.” The parish had previously owned a house in Kianga which was used for a youth worker many years ago. When the youth worker finally left, ultimately the house was sold and the funds invested. Those funds were not enough to purchase the property, so a loan would be necessary. I checked how much the ADIF would lend the parish on the basis of what we could rent the house for, and there was a shortfall of more than $40k. We could of course dip into other reserves to meet the shortfall, but it would be preferable not to go down that track.

The possibility was put to parish council. Again, we discussed at length the pros and cons: how would something like this benefit the parish? What opportunities would it open up for ministry? What would be the risk? How would we come up with the shortfall?

Parish council wasn’t able to come to a decision that meeting, so we scheduled a special meeting a week later. We all committed to pray about it, as did the morning prayer group. We also asked the wider church to pray.

At the special meeting, after much discussion, parish council voted 6-3 to ‘test the waters’. The motion was to make an offer which we thought the parish could afford, and we asked God to open the doors, should he want us to go in this direction.

We made an offer which we felt would allow us to have the funds to do some basic renovations to the property, to meet stamp duty and legal fees, and to not have a shortfall. It was then up to the Harrises - and God – to make this possible.

We received an answer this week – the Harrises accepted the parish’s offer – which is really quite amazing, as it was considerably less than the asking price.

God has opened the door, so now we’re looking for some input from the wider church.

I’ll open things up for questions in a minute, but first, let me just run a few possibilities by you regarding how the property might be used:

**Some Possibilities:**

1. Many of you will be aware of a ministry called Ricky’s Place in Bega. It is a community supported initiative to provide meals for the homeless in Bega, and is based at the Anglican Church. Narooma is in the process of beginning a similar initiative, which will be called ‘Monty’s; and will be located directly opposite the Harris house in the Uniting Church centre. One possibility is to build on this with what might become a ‘community hub’ with services which could provide for the needs of minority groups in the community; groups such as the disabled, or the mentally ill, or youth at risk, or young families, or the Koori community – all of which the government provides funding for.
2. We could look at an enterprise which would both meet a need in the community and provide an income for the parish. This could something like a child care centre, or day care centre for the elderly. It could be a development which might provide retirement units and/or offices.
3. A men’s shed or other community gathering place is another idea, although the financial ramifications of that would need to be explored.

So there are many possibilities, all of which would connect us with our local community in a way we are not connected at present; some of which might also provide an income for the parish.

The first step of faith is to acquire the property. We would then need to continue to seek God’s guidance as to how we use it as a resource to grow his kingdom.

**Questions?**