



DIOCESE of
PARRAMATTA



“BEHOLD, I AM DOING A NEW THING” ISAIAH 43:19

Biblical Context and
Thematic Connections with Synodality

Introduction

Under the leadership of Pope Francis, the Church around the world has been moving toward a shift in culture, slowly but surely Synodality is becoming the way that we live out our lives as the people of God.

Synodality is not just a one-time event but a process that is becoming our way of being Church. Pope Francis has stated in many ways that synodality is where God is calling the Church of the third millennium: “Synodality is the way of being the Church today according to the will of God, in a dynamic of discerning and listening together to the voice of the Holy Spirit.”¹

Synods and Synodality are not new to the Church having been recorded since the earliest centuries of the common era. History records that bishops of neighbouring churches in the Second Century CE, gathered together to find solutions to their common problems. We know, for example, that bishops, presbyters, deacons and laity attended the Synod of Elvira around about the year 305. Synods continued to be a common practice and by the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution.²

At this time, in the wake of the Plenary Council and amidst this revival of the Synodal way, Bishop Vincent Long has invited his local Church here in the Diocese of Parramatta, to join with the universal church on this path. Remembering that Scripture must always be at the heart of the Synodal Journey, Bishop Vincent has given much thought, and in prayer has found the scripture passage that will guide us in this process:

“Behold, I am doing a new thing” *Isaiah 43:19.*

This document hopes to unpack some of the wisdom of this verse and it’s biblical context as well as encourage our ongoing engagement with the Word of God throughout the Synod. As we read the Scriptures and pray with them, we deeply encounter Christ, who is God’s Word in our midst, and we see ourselves, our Church, and our world more clearly through the eyes of faith.

¹ Pope Francis www.synod.va ©2021.

² c.f. Dr. Brian Thornton *University of St. Michael's College* ©2021

Context and Connection

Our guiding passage is taken from a larger section of the Prophet Isaiah commonly referred to as the book of consolations, as it begins in chapter 40 with the Prophet's words: *"Comfort my people and console them, says your God"*. Likely written or compiled toward the end of the Babylonian exile this section broadly speaks of the Lord's plans to liberate and restore his people Israel, reminding the reader/hearer that God has saved his people before, and will again.

Zooming in to chapter 43, the whole chapter illustrates the redemptive action of the Lord toward his people, asserting his role as liberator when they were captive in Egypt. The Lord is reminding his people that this will not be the first time he has overcome a great nation. He did the same when he drowned the riders and chariots of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea during the first exodus (see Exod 14:21-31).

As readers we are meant to see the connections between the two events – captivity in Egypt and exile in Babylon – but this is where verse 19 offers us a new insight to the old stories. In full Isaiah 43:19 is as follows: *"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert"* this verse presents a subtle yet vital turn in the purpose of the prophet's line of reasoning. God is most certainly affirming that he was the God of the Exodus, but he also asserts the wonderful freshness of his new act which is in process. In the past God had made a way through the waters of the Red Sea; now he would make a new way, through the desert! "The fundamental principles of the divine activity are changeless, but the outward shape of that activity alters with the changing needs of God's people."³

The use of the Hebrew word הִנֵּה (*Translit. hinnēh*) here is an important choice by the prophet. It is translated in our text as "Behold" and carries with it the intention of a literary marker used to enliven a narrative, change a scene, emphasize an idea, or call attention to detail. The Hebrew word הִנֵּה (*Translit. hinnēh*) can also be translated, "See! Look! Now! Be alert! Be present!" all of which denote the importance of the turn verse 19 takes; God Has done great things for his people in the past, but that cannot be their focus now (43:18). Instead, they need to look at the present moment and see that God is doing a new thing, preparing the way for a new exodus (43:19). In the past, he had made a way through the sea (43:16), but now he is making a well-watered way in the desert (43:20)⁴ The connection to the exodus from Egypt was not only to show that God was bringing the people out of captivity once more, but to reassure them that God is with them now, in the process of liberation. Just as he continued to walk with the Israelites in the wilderness of

³ c.f. *Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): Old Testament*, ©2004

⁴ c.f. *Africa Bible Commentary*, © 2006, 2010, and 2022.

Sinai, providing everything that they needed – water in dryness and a pathway through harsh landscapes – the prophet implies the continuing commitment of a God who walks with his people.

Opening verse 19 with “Behold” הִנֵּה (*Translit. hinnēh*) is meant to grab our attention! To shake us awake! This way of startling the reader/hearer, suggests that the people of God are in need of startling! That we all too easily fall into complacency, and we don’t see the new thing that God is doing because we are waiting for it to look like the old thing, or worse, that we find ourselves not believing that God even can do new things. As Claus Westermann suggests, in this verse we see that “Israel requires to be shaken out of a faith that has nothing to learn about God’s activity, ... a faith that has ceased to be able to expect anything really new from God”⁵

In our reading of Isaiah, if we take the “old thing” to be the Exodus, as alluded to in the previous verses of chapter 43, the “new thing” then is a new Exodus; an emancipation from Babylon not unlike the ancient emancipation from Egypt; then it seems that the new thing is not unlike the old thing. Perhaps the most interesting and sensitive issue here is the relationship between old and new, of continuity and discontinuity. There is no doubt that the new thing cannot be understood apart from reference to the old thing that gives us categories for discernment. But it is equally the case that Israel here is urged to get its mind off old things to focus totally on the new because it pertains to present reality. And the present moment is all we ever really have. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us “Christians affirm that Jesus is a radical newness from God, and yet is situated in and cannot be known apart from all that is old, remembered, and treasured. I suspect that the Prophet wants Israel to resist a ‘thin past’. Faith requires a ‘thick memory’ that is always letting ancient miracles be re-enacted in always fresh and daring ways.”⁶

And so, this is our challenge; can we walk with each other and with God as we embark upon this Synodal Journey? Can we bring with us the memories of God working in our tradition and our communities into the realities of today, bringing old and new into dialogue? Can we commit ourselves to discerning the signs of the times in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains, trusting that the same God of the Exodus and the Exile is walking with us ready to do something new, here and now?

⁵ Albertz, Rainer, *The Bible and the Church I: The Legacy of Claus Westermann for Theology and Church* © 2013.

⁶ c.f. Brueggemann, Walter. *“Isaiah 40-66”*. Pp59-60. © 1998.