

Central to the Baptism service is the declared willingness of the person being baptised, or the Godparents acting on behalf of a person unable to answer for themselves, to change direction and follow God. Of course, implicit in that there is an assumption, usually correctly that the current life trajectory that they are on is not fully in sync with where God would have them be. At the heart of this whole process is the assumption that one doesn't just willy nilly turn to God, or repent of their sins, or renounce evil, but that there will be a period of reflection about ones life that will then lead to that change in trajectory or direction in life that one needs to fulfil the promise. Of course there is the assumption that it will not just be at baptism that we do this reflection and make the decision for change in our life there is an assumption in the Christian faith that we will live out our baptismal promises all the days of our lives, and so always be willing to make the decision for genuine reflection and genuine life trajectory change consistent with a life in Christ.

This is why the month of February has been set aside for the theme of Reflection. It is not just about reflecting on our sins, although that is certainly implicit, but it is also about reflecting on our lives as a whole, are we living God centred life giving lives? That is what we are called to be.

See, we often forget that theologically sin is more about missing the goal of life and we concentrate on specific naughtiness. Don't get me wrong, that's important, but at its heart, the word we use for sin has a lot to do with missing the mark, and we can miss the mark in our life in general as well as our moral lives. We can live lives that are not life giving, but soul destroying, giving us a feeling of imprisonment, or bondage, or enslavement. We can find this in our work lives where we find ourselves out of balance between our work and our leisure time. We can find ourselves in personal relationships that do not honour us, or God, or make us feel trapped, less than human, etc. We can find ourselves with friends who suck the life out of us, or who encourage us down risky lifestyle choices. We can find ourselves having made bad personal choices of life such that have led us down a path to substance abuse, pornography, inappropriate relationships, etc. All these aspects, and more, of our lives are missing the mark or the goal of life that God desires for us, and requires us to go down a path of reflection and repentance just as surely as reflecting on inappropriate behaviour that we associate with sin does.

Reflecting on all these aspects of our lives is important, and it is also important that we do this reflection process honestly, or we are not going to be able to even venture down the path of repentance, and real-life change.

However, and it is a big, however. There is a step that we need to take before we can travel down the path of repentance.

Ask yourself this question, what is stopping you from changing your life decisions. Think about a specific one. Is your work life balance out of whack? What is stopping you from allowing you to return your life to being in balance? Is your job sucking the life out of you? What is stopping you from making the decisions you need to make to allow you to have that rectified? Do you have inappropriate relationships? They may be personal that you have caused or allowed to happen, or they may be ones that have developed over time. They don't have to be naughty relationships they may be power imbalance, they may be an ex with whom you are always fighting with, it may be your spouse with whom you have drifted apart from, etc. What is stopping you from making the decisions to restore that relations to its proper and appropriate state?

For me, having dealt with a number of people over the years and when I look at myself and my life journey the number one barrier to stopping me from making life decisions has been fear. A fear of the unknown is one of the biggest barriers to change that we can encounter. If I leave my job what will happen to my family, to me, how will I provide for them? If I break off this toxic relationship, then I don't have any other friends, will I be lonely?

As human beings we like to know, we like to have certainty, and when we don't know, when we don't have certainty then fear stops us from change, even if the current life situation is toxic because we have learnt to adapt to the current situation and we feel we have a level of control and knowledge about the situation we are in, and we have built in mechanisms to cope, even if those mechanisms are not perfect, or fail us from time to time. The classic is those people, usually, but not always women caught up in domestic violence. At a recent workshop I attended on this important issue, we were told about the cycle of violence, and the fear that stops victims from breaking out, not their fault, its how it works, they know cycle of violence, they know the quiet times, they know the build-up, and they have built into their psyche coping mechanisms, and emotional rationales for staying, even though they know they should get out, but fear of the unknown stops them. Fear becomes a resistor to change, it even inoculates us from making changes in our lives that will give us a better outcome in our lives. Fear at its core is a self preservation emotion, it is centred on ourselves.

The antidote to fear, is love. Just as an aside, fear and love are emotions that do not exist on their own. They are not floating around the ether, just there, they are associated with us. I sense fear, I express love. Note what I

just said, I sense fear, I express love. Fear is about self, love is about others, although we do need to be able to love ourselves.

In the English language we are hamstrung to a large extent because we only have one word, love. In the New testament there are three words. Agape, phileo and eros. If I want to say that I love my brother, I would say I phileo my brother. If I wanted to say that I love my wife I might say that I phileo my wife but if I desire her I eros her. Eros is love with desire and phile is love that we might generally use most of the time to express love in English. Agape is the highest form of love. It is always the love that God expresses to us. Phileo and eros are loves that we express amongst ourselves, it is associated with us, we humans express love in this way, God only expresses love as agape. It is possible for us to express agape love, infact St. Paul uses the term extensively in 1Corinthians 13, but he can only say that we we love in the Godly way only when we have God at the centre of our lives.

I have often said that we need to have God at the centre of our lives, and this is one of the reasons we need to have God at the centre of our lives. The powerful human emotion of fear can only be overcome by the more powerful Godly love agape. 1John 4:18 says there is no fear in love, perfect love casts out fear. The only love that is perfect is agape love because it is

the sole expression of God. I said earlier that the emotions of fear and love are not floating around, they are expressions of a person, either us or God. Because God has perfect love, there is no fear, and so we need to have God at the centre of our lives so that we can receive that perfect love from God to us which will then cast out fear. Interestingly by having God at the centre of our lives, and by wedding our lives to God so that we become one, we will then appropriate God's love in us, and be able to express agapae love ourselves, not because it is of us, but because it is of God who dwells in us, and is with us.

Having God then at the centre of our lives, and expressing is love, casting out fear allows us then to move more confidently into an unknown future, because now we are not doing this life changing stuff on our own, we are doing it with God at the centre of our lives. I have seen this change occur in people in this parish over the last 13 years. I have seen high powered professionals who have had their livelihood taken away from them, and they have been scared, but when they put God at the centre of their lives they were able to cope and in time the solution was found and they ended up in a much better situation than they were before, but they had to go through the change with God. I have seen people in this church who have had terrible relationships either changed or restored. They were nervous,

maybe even terrified of what the future would hold, but as they expressed to me God did something marvellous, and it was made right.

I conducted a wedding outside of the church and it has been expressed to me that from that moment God started them on a new life trajectory that has been scary, but when they have had God in the centre they have felt peace and contentment that God has all things in place for them.

So, whatever your life situation, can I encourage you this Lent to truly reflect on your life, and truly and honestly assess where you are in your relationship with God. If the future looks scary that is when you need to consciously put God at the centre of your life, and allow his perfect love to cast out that fear, and when that fear is either gone, or at least put at bay, and put under control by the love of God such that fear is no longer controlling you, but God's love, then, and only then can we start down the path of repentance into the unknown and the wonderful and exciting joys that God has prepared for us as we continue our journey of life. In doing so we will truly be living out our baptismal promises, as we continue to put God in the centre of our lives.