

What are you doing for Lent?

Some I know are giving up something; some choose to do something, read a particular book, pay more attention to their attendance at worship or whatever. Some make one more attempt to give up smoking, others go diets, reduce alcohol intake – none of these are bad things in themselves – but is that all there is to Lent?

The Service of Ash Wednesday in your prayer book begins with the following declaration, which I have included in the first of the boxed items on your lesson sheet.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: since early days Christians have observed with great devotion the time of our Lord's passion and resurrection. It became the custom of the Church to prepare for this by a season of penitence and fasting.

At first this season of Lent was observed by those who were preparing for baptism at Easter and by those who were to be restored to the Church's fellowship from which they had been separated through sin. In course of time the Church came to recognize that, by a careful keeping of these days, all Christians might take to heart the call to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel, and so grow in faith and in devotion to our Lord.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Lord to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.

So Lent and the disciplines of Lent have their origin in a period of preparation for Baptism. As you are aware by now I find Baptism and the service of Baptism provides me with much food for thought. So this Lent I am going to be reflecting on Baptism. With Confirmation coming shortly after Easter, it is an opportunity to accompany them on their journey.

So what is Baptism? It is a lovely family occasion, as wider family and friends join with parents in celebrating the birth of a child. It is a lovely occasion for a Parish, an affirmation of the continuing life of the Parish. But there are other ways of celebrating the birth of a child. So why do we seek Baptism for our children? Is it just a nice thing to do, something to keep Granny quiet? Is it just a matter of securing a place in the Burrow School? It is of course more and parents come looking for more. So what are we about as parents, as parish, as clergy when we undertake baptism?

The Service of Baptism begins with the following declaration which I have printed on the lesson sheet:

Our Lord Jesus Christ has told us
that to enter the kingdom of heaven
we must be born again of water and the Spirit,
and has given us baptism as the sign and seal of this new birth.
Here we are washed by the Holy Spirit and made clean.
Here we are clothed with Christ,
dying to sin that we may live his risen life.
As children of God, we have a new dignity
and God calls us to fulness of life.

To enter the kingdom of heaven we must be born again of water and the Spirit. Born again – what comes to your mind as you hear that? Birth is about beginnings, new beginnings, new life. People will have a variety of experience, of understanding of that new birth. I think back to my time as Chaplain to the Rotunda Hospital. One thing I learned very quickly was that no two births were identical. There were (and I speak as a mere male in this regard) the births that happened quickly, without complications. There were those others that were more drawn out, with the mother spending time in hospital before the birth, surrounded with anxiety, the whole business more traumatic. What both share in common is that at the end of the process there was a child by the side of the bed, new life, new potential. Just as no two physical births are the same I have become more and more convinced over the years that no two spiritual births are identical. I think of Peter and Paul, both ending their lives in the city of Rome, their spiritual journeys very different. Paul with his experience of a sudden and dramatic conversion, Peter I suspect more drawn out; very different experiences but equally authentic.

A birth is but a beginning. Physically, mentally, emotionally we do not remain as infants. We grow, we develop. Spiritual birth is but a beginning. I will often say, I feel I know Christ now; but I would be awfully disappointed if in ten years time I did not know him better. Faith is a plant that must be tended, nourished if it is to grow. Faith is a journey, a journey of a life time; a journey that has its origins in the death and resurrection of Christ. The late Archbishop Michael Ramsey wrote of Baptism,

Baptism declares that the beginning of a man's Christianity is not what he feels and experiences but what God in Christ has done for him. And his feelings and experiences and virtues have meaning not in themselves in isolation but as bearing

witness to the one Body in which alone the individual can grow to full manhood. The life of a Christian is continual response to the fact of his baptism; he continually learns that he has died and risen with Christ, and that his life is a part of the life of the one family. *Michael Ramsey 'The Gospel and the Catholic Church pp59-60*

The rest of my life is a process of learning what it is to die and rise with Christ. Paul, in writing to the Romans puts it like this (I have chosen to use the *Message* translation.

That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country. *Romans 6:3-5*

And so the introduction to the Service of Baptism concludes

As children of God, we have a new dignity
and God calls us to fullness of life.

I was born as member of the Brew family back in November 1949. I grew up as a member of that family. I experienced the love of my parents and grandparents and my brothers. As I grew up I began to learn of my own family. My mother's father had worked on the ill fated R101 airship project and we had a tray at home, the handles of which had made from bits of the sister ships of the ill fated airship that had crashed. My father's father had grown up in Limerick and had trained as an electrical engineer, spending time in India. Looking at family photographs, listening to family stories, I gained an insight as to who I was as a member of my family.

To go back to Michael Ramsey:

The life of a Christian is continual response to the fact of his baptism; he continually learns that he has died and risen with Christ, and that his life is a part of the life of the one family.

To be a member of the Church, to be a member of the Body of Christ is to discover who I am, what it is to die and to rise with Christ; that is my true dignity. The rest of my life is growing into that, growing into Christ, that I might discover in my own life:

I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. *Gal 2:19-20*