

For the first few weeks of this new year we are trying to answer the question 'what does faith look like'?

The Bible speaks often and very plainly about faith – that it is a reality, something that gives “substance” to things before they become visible to the natural eye. Indeed. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians (5.7) says that we walk by faith, not by sight. We live out our faith.

Last week Jon finished by asking “How can we learn to see, accept and love ourselves as Jesus does?” You may not be surprised to hear me say that the answer is by learning to live loved. And, as was made very clear to me by my director of training earlier this week; learning is a life long experience....we never stop learning....so learning to live loved is a life long experience.

In our Old Testament reading Isaiah prophesies about the faithful and compassionate nature of Jesus; that he might be bruised like a reed, but never broken and about the light he brings to our dark earth will never be dimmed.

I like the way the message version of the passage puts it: Take a good look at my servant. I'm backing him to the hilt. He's the one I chose, and I couldn't be more pleased with him. What's more, I've bathed him with my Spirit, my life.

We were created to be in relationship with God; to be in communion with him. Or to put it another way as Jon did last week – God calls us into sharing his kingdom and we can best do that by embracing Jesus as our spiritual next of kin.

And Jesus' baptism gives a very good illustration of what it means to learn to live loved.

1. It means being filled with peace – the dove symbolizes the peace that the Holy Spirit brings to a faith filled life
2. It means being assured of adoption, confirming what Jon said last week, that we are, first and foremost sons and daughters of God
3. It means knowing we are loved by God just as Jesus was – because God is love
4. It means experiencing a sense of God's delight and pleasure

Let's watch this film clip. [Chariots of fire – I feel God's pleasure]

“I believe that God made me for a purpose but he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure”. I feel God's pleasure.

As we heard, those are the famous words spoken by Eric Liddell to his sister when coming to his decision to become a missionary.

I'd always imagined that Adam would have felt a similar pleasure when he first walked with God in the Garden of Eden and I had struggled for years trying to emulate that same feeling of absolute pleasure that Eric Liddell felt and spoke about.

No matter what I did or how good I was, whether at the bridge table, in the workplace or on the sports field there was always something not quite right.

And then just over ten years ago the penny finally dropped – that it has nothing to do with any gift or talent I might have, but everything to do with having a faith filled and loving relationship with God.

For me, that relationship is most obvious on this beach in Portugal. It might not be listed in the Sunday Time's best 50 beaches in the world, but for me it is where heaven and earth meet. It is where Jane and me are always filled with peace; it is where we realized that we were loved by God as a couple and where every time we step foot on that beach we experience that sense of God's pleasure.

That is why we return to the beach every year; for us it is our private place where we can walk with God, be in communion with him, and continue to learn to see, accept and love ourselves as Jesus does. You may well have your own private place. One friend speaks of her garden; another of sitting quietly in prayer at the kitchen table.

But of course, the idyl never lasts. It didn't last for Adam as the distractions and temptations put in his way became too much and the busyness and demands of life interrupts and intrude into my communion with God, usually even before we reach the airport to fly home.

Unlike Jesus. Immediately after his baptism, the bible narrative continues as Jesus is driven into the wilderness and tested by Satan. Twice he is challenged....If you are the Son of God....before being offered sovereignty over all the earth. But Jesus remains true to being the person God meant him to be.

Our liturgy speaks of Christ being the same yesterday, today and forever. But we do not have that consistency. We do change; none of us could genuinely claim to be the same person we were on our 21st birthday. Life events, situations and experiences do impact on us. But it is how we respond to and deal with those life events that is important.

I was warned that being ordained will change me. Whilst it is still early days; I like to think I am the same Terry I was before 3rd December. My hat size is still a very modest 6 7/8ths and I still have the same doubts and uncertainties that I have lived with for years.

But at the same time, I acknowledge that my circumstances have changed; I now have an authority I did not have previously and there is a visible sign to show that every time I put on my clerical collar. So the challenge for me is to continue growing in my faith, learning to live loved and continue on the life long journey to being the person God called me to be, despite of - not because of - my change in circumstances.

I have told the story of how I disappointed my father by failing to become a professional footballer. But he had a plan B. He was a fisherman and worked hard to earn what was known as a 'pink ticket' which guaranteed him employment until such a time as he wished to pass it on to me, thereby guaranteeing me a career as a fisherman too.

I scoffed at the idea that I would be a fisherman. That was really hard work. I wonder what his reaction would be today if he knew that in a slightly different way I did become a fisherman...or rather a fisher of men - just as my Father with a capital F meant me to be.

Amen.

