

Steven's reflection for **3 November** 2024 – Mark 12:28-34

As a child I was taken to Sunday School at Calvary Bible Presbyterian Church, and through its witness I welcomed Jesus into my life, which was probably the single most important decision I've ever made. But growing up I was a Christian unto myself; I was not part of any Church community. And that was ok with me. Because I was a child of the 60s I was wary of anything that represented The Establishment. And that included what *we* called Organised Religion. As though *disorganised* religion might be a better option. So, I went through life until the day in 1978 that I became a father. One's world perspective changes when one becomes a parent for the first time. When Alison was a year old and I was turning 30, we embarked on a cross-country trip where my pathetic little car rebelled against the summer heat and the long distances. We'd had more than one breakdown before entering one of the hottest places on earth. Death Valley is called that for a good reason. It was hot. The distance to travel was great. The car was acting uncertainly, and I had some very precious cargo sweltering in the back seat. I was frightened for the safety of my daughter, so I did one of those embarrassing things we humans do when we get scared. I made a bargain with God, the God I believed in but didn't take very seriously. I told God that if he got my daughter home safely, I would have her baptised.

That was one of those really bizarre Holy Spirit moments that you don't know is a Holy Spirit moment until much, much later. Baptism was not a thought I could ever have come up with on my own. I hadn't a clue what a Baptism was about. It wasn't anything I had *ever* considered. It's not like it was something I had discussed and rejected. It had just never entered my mind - until *that* moment in the Nevada desert in fear for my daughter's life. If anything, I had a deeply negative impression of Baptisms which felt like an Exorcism, and the baby was having The Devil ritually removed from him or her. It was nothing that the poor innocent baby deserved or warranted because I didn't believe in the 'Devil'. And even if I did, I knew that Jesus has once and for all time defeated him. The Devil for me is the opposite of the Holy Spirit; it's that little voice within that says it's ok to do something that in our heart of hearts we know is not right.

I believe that voice is our own, and when allowed free rein can overwhelm our lives and those around us; and can best be defeated by turning outside ourselves to the one who loves us most, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

As to daughter's Baptism, I didn't belong to a church and America has many of them. By the urging of the Holy Spirit, I turned to our local Anglican church where the vicar agreed to baptise Alison; but he did suggest that I might turn up for a church service first. Grumble, grumble. I did as he said but with all my defences up. I was prepared to hate it and raise all sorts of intellectual objections why Organised Religion was stupid.

I nearly walked out when I read that the sermon topic for that day was "Sin". I knew there would be finger-pointing and I'd be given a long list of the things I shouldn't be doing. The vicar was going to tell me about all the sinful things in my life; he was going to nag and criticise.

My good friend Rev Harold Knowles did none of those things that day. He read a lesson from Romans: "*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*"

That was it. No lists. The whole of God's commandments are summed up in that single word, love. Sin then he simply defined as the *failure to love*. We are commanded by God to love; when we fail to do so, then we have sinned. That idea changed my whole perspective and attitude toward the Church and religion. It changed my life.

It's that simple. And it's that complicated, because God has left it to us to work out what is the most loving thing to do. And sometimes we have no *good* choices, only a series of bad ones, and we have to decide which is the least unloving. Thankfully God sends us his Holy Spirit to constantly be whispering in our ears, to urge and guide and instruct us. But we've got to listen. We've got to *learn* how to listen. We've got to be able to learn to distinguish between the urgings of the Holy Spirit and the urgings of the Devil within.

That's where Christian communities come in handy. That day 45 years ago I looked again and lost my bias against Church and organised religion, and regretted not having found it sooner. I came to love church as a place where I could learn and grow, and find comfort and guidance, find joy and peace knowing that sin has no dominion over me since I am not under the Law, but under the Grace of God whose free gift to me is eternal life in Christ Jesus my Lord. Amen.