

13th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

Hebrews 12.18-29

The Army... The Edge...

When I joined the Army, the first 45 days were the worst. But it's the first and the last day I remember the best. On the first day, all of us were taken to a room and filled out paperwork. There were a couple of corporals hanging around with malicious intent but a Captain spoke to us in a rather pleasant and friendly fashion about what was coming up. He administered the oaths of service. He collected his things and walked off. Then the corporals took over and boy did the world change... I had stepped into a thoroughly new world where shirts were tucked, we stood straight and never answered back...then recruit training took over and we were definitely in an entirely different culture. The last day was the best day. I'll spare you the detail, but on that day we'd completed something, we'd become part of a greater whole, we were working to a purpose for a reason.

Now I'm not drawing an exact parallel between recruit training in the Army and Christian baptismal life, but the similarities are there: new culture, new world; an old life superseded by a new one; becoming part of a greater whole; working to a purpose for a reason. Baptism is our entry into God's world, God's vision. It's our initiation into his great project of recreation. It's our initiation into being one of his people for his world.

Baptism opens up a new reality, a new way of life, a new way of holiness. Baptism opens up to us hope – hope of our own resurrection in the time to come; the time when our bodies will be just like that of Jesus; the time when we shall enter, fully, into the kingdom of God. Baptism is not a signpost; it is *the* gateway to a life beyond imagining. And that life is God's life and it so full of exciting and welcoming features that we *ought* to find it overwhelming and bewildering, unaware of the totality of what's occurring when Edward is baptised. And at that moment the old world is left behind and he enters the new one, part of God's future.

The important thing then, is that in the simple but powerful action of plunging someone into the water in the name of the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – there is a real dying to the old creation and a real rising into the new – with all the dangerous privileges and responsibilities that then accompany the new life as it sets out in the as yet unredeemed world (hence the need to turn our backs on all that is wrong with this world: the devil, rebellion, deceit, corruption, evil and sin). Baptism is not magic. It's not a conjuring trick with water. But nor is it simply a visual aid. It is one of the points established by Jesus himself, where heaven and earth interlock, where new creation, resurrection life, appears within the midst of the old. This may seem terrifying and unapproachable or bewildering and overwhelming but God is inviting us, through baptism, to share in his life, to share in his holiness; a holiness revealed by his Son, Jesus as welcoming, cleansing and healing.

There is a word of warning though, God, as Hebrews has shown, is not to be taken lightly or casually. There is a promise that God is going to take creation by the scruff of the neck and make it; at last, what he always intended it to be. Heaven and earth will be shaken in such a way that everything transient, temporary, secondary and second-rate will fall away. Then that which is new creation, based on Jesus himself and the resurrection will shine out more brightly. This new creation will of course, include us, and, through us, the new world which God had always promised.

Baptism is at the forefront of Christian living; because it is the foundational event for all serious Christian living, all dying to sin and all coming alive with Christ. In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light. To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him, to come into the heavenly city, to bring our worship before God, bow down before the living God and thank him from the bottom of our hearts for what he's done and for what he will do in our baptised lives. That is the privilege of being a follower of Jesus. That is the life to which God now calls us.