

Sunday 22 June 2008
The Fifth Sunday after Trinity
Romans 6: 1b-11 Matthew 10: 24-39

The Dean: Things unseen and eternal

When, long ago, I was training to be a priest we had an ancient monk on the college staff who taught us, amongst other things, how to conduct a baptism. We had a rather large dolly which he would hold between his left arm and his side and, as though about to launch it into the font, baptize it. If baby was making a noise, he pronounced, all you then had to do was squeeze your elbow into baby's side and thus prevent it from breathing for the seconds it was in your charge. That would silence baby for the baptism itself and on handing it back, once more squalling, everyone would remark on how wonderful the vicar is with babies.

We await Ruby's baptism with bated breath!

There is a story of two old Chelsea pensioners who were talking. One of them said, 'Do you remember the stuff they used to put in our food when we were cadets, to stop us thinking about girls?' 'Yes' said the other. 'Well, in my case I think it's just beginning to work.' For all of here this morning it is a good opportunity to remind ourselves of all the things that were said over our heads when we were baptized.

The service of Baptism is full of upside-down talk, back-to-front experience. We begin as Christians not with baby-talk, but with the thought of death and dying – you and I were baptized into the death of Jesus, and we rose again to new life. Christianity is not a better life but a new life. This is no flummery of mystical words, no flowery metaphor. When Jesus died and rose again, something happened not only to himself, but for all of those who believe in him. His love catches us up in a new kind of existence – a life which lies beyond and under the surface of our daily life. By faith we enter into this existence and in every moment we meet with God, in a relationship which is as creative as spontaneous and which brings with it joy and creative energy. Martin Luther taught that faith is like boiling water – which is still the same and yet all of which is changed when it boils. From the moment of our baptism we begin to grow our resurrection bodies, for it is with us as with tadpoles and caterpillars, that our growing personalities will need new instruments for the kind of life God has in store for us.

Another thing I like about the Baptism service is its realism. There's a whiff of gunpowder about it. It has no romantic, fairy-tale gloss on real life. Ruby will be in receipt of the words 'fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and devil and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.'

The resurrection life is about hope lived out in the light of the endless mercy and unconditional love of God shown in all its glory on the cross of Jesus. It is about losing self – self-centredness, self-absorption – and finding our true selves in him.

One of the noblest Germans of the last century was Count Helmuth James von Moltke. He was the descendant of a great military family but he himself had grown to hate all violence, and though he was committed to resistance to Hitler, he would take

no part in any plot to assassinate him. But he too was arrested in the aftermath of that plot and was executed in January 1945. His last letters to his wife and children are a model of Christian hope and self-giving. He wrote at the very end:

I just wept a little, not because I was sad or melancholy, not because I wanted to turn back, but from an intensity of gratitude at this proof of God's presence. It is not given to us to see him face to face, but we must needs be overwhelmed when we suddenly realize that he has gone before us all our lives, as a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, and that in a flash, he suddenly lets us see it. Now there is nothing more to happen.

God bless you Ruby – and all the very newest members of our community – and may we all look eagerly and joyously to the things which are unseen and eternal.

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