

## BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Confirmation

St. John's Spittal & on Spittal beach

Monday October 10<sup>th</sup> 2016

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Spittal promenade and beach are great reminders of an earlier British enthusiasm for seaside holidays; maybe they're coming back into fashion? My memory was of sandy beaches and my building underground car parks – especially under people's deckchairs. You can see I had an evil mind. If all this was going on near enough to the water's edge, when the deckchair fell into the cavern I'd excavated, then there might even be a splash into some water.

There's always something dramatic about going down into the water. In the sea and even in swimming pools, there's always a desire to make a good splash. Water has a very dramatic quality. At its darkest it can be the instrument of death – either by drowning or by being washed away in a flood. The epic story of Noah and his ark in the Old Testament is one of the most telling examples of this.

So today Shannon has been baptised by being taken down into the sea and given a good soaking. None of this imagery is new. John the Baptist baptised Jesus in the River Jordan. In this part of the world too, this happened from earliest times. St. Paulinus, whom we remember today, was just one amongst a second contingent of monks, following after St. Augustine of Canterbury, to be sent by Gregory the Great to re-convert these islands. Paulinus would eventually become Bishop of York. But on his way there, he lived the life of a great missionary. He travelled through northern England and loved to baptise people dramatically in lakes and rivers. So, tradition has it that at Holystone near Alwinton, and then still nearer by to here, in the River Glen at Yeavinger near Kirknewton, thousands were baptised.

But what is this all about? Is it just some publicity seeking drama? Is it simply an attention-seeking activity? Well, the answer is unquestionably no. Let's go back a stage to see what all this water imagery is about. In the early Church, the most staggering and essential part of the gospel was the resurrection of Jesus. Resurrection meant hope, and hope is of the essence of the Christian gospel. But resurrection did not come cheaply. First Jesus suffered and died – only after terrible suffering did God raise Jesus.

This remarkable miracle and gift to us was captured in baptism. As new Christians were made, they too were taken down into the grave as Jesus was, and then raised up. So, this dowsing in the sea, in a river or in a font was a *drowning*. It was a sign of going down into the grave with Jesus. Then those baptised came up out of the water, raised with Jesus in his resurrection. In those days they went down into the water in their ordinary clothes. After they were baptised, they were clad in the brightest of white garments. They had been transformed, redeemed.

All this was completed with two other symbolic acts. First, the Bishop anointed each of them, just as kings and queens are anointed. Then he'd lay his hands on them as a sign of the Holy Spirit coming down upon them. Baptism, then, is a dramatic, transformative moment. Shannon, Jenny and Shirley's lives will never be the same. Indeed I shall them give a charge. This means I shall say how this changes their lives. Indeed, I'll ask questions to you all. You will all be challenged to respond.

But it won't be questions to each of you simply as individuals. It will be to all of us as a *Church*. Will we care for the weak, shall we watch over and support the poor? Shall we engage

with the political life of our town, our country, our nation, by praying for our leaders? In the readings you've just heard, we pick up something of this amazing transformation and change.

Isaiah's prophecy is of 'swords being beaten into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks'. In the Letter to the Ephesians we hear, 'We were dead through our trespasses, but by grace, through faith we have been saved.' Then we heard the challenge of Jesus to preach this faith in all the world. It is St. Matthew's equivalent of the charge that I shall give to all of you.

Now I said 'all of you.' For although it is Shannon, Jenny, and Shirley who have been baptised and confirmed, Shannon actually experiencing both here this evening – even though you three have come anew to be members of God's Church, the challenges we've heard are to every one of us. St. Paulinus and those who came after, St. Wilfrid, St. Hilda and many others changed the world of north east England.

Today's a very exciting but also a very challenging day for all of us. Shall we allow God's grace to help us change north east England, Northumbria, again? Might any of you have particular calls – to be priests like Matthew and me – or even monks like Wilfrid and Paulinus? Now there's a challenge for every one of you here. Amen

### Readings

Isaiah. 2. 2-15.

Ephesians. 2. 4-10.

Matthew. 28. 16-end.