

Newsletter for May 2011

Thomas, Alfie and Maisie

The training sessions had lasted for several months, becoming intensive in the last week. They had been challenging, and hard work, with rigorous tests along the way. A few had dropped out; but for the rest of them, their enthusiasm had deepened as the weeks went by: the course leader knew his stuff, and those who'd gone through it before were on hand to give them encouragement. And at last they came to the night of their initiation. They gathered in the dark, tired but full of anticipation. The awe-inspiring rituals unfolded in the gloom, lasting several hours, until they reached their climax. They put on their new uniforms and were led through the great doors in a blaze of light.

What's going on here? Is it a training course to join the secret service, or perhaps the crew of Starship Enterprise? An undercover guerilla operation, deep in the jungle? Or perhaps the final stage of medical exams, before newly-qualified doctors emerge onto the wards in their new white coats?

It is in fact a description of a service of baptism and confirmation, from the third or fourth century: what one writer at the time called the 'awe-inspiring rites of initiation.' By this date, Christians were no longer persecuted on a massive scale (though there was still some sporadic outbreaks). They were no longer meeting furtively in each others' houses, but were able to erect purpose-built churches, and, for reasons which I'll explain in a moment, separate baptisteries (of the kind you may have seen in Italy). But although the church had ceased to be a secret society and had gone public, they kept a sense of mystery, of awe and wonder, about the sacraments. They took preparation for baptism and confirmation seriously, in deadly earnest – and it was adults rather than infants or youngsters who were the candidates in those days. It lasted months, or even years, with the bishop as course leader passing on the elements of faith stage by stage, to those who showed themselves to be serious about it. Other church members played their part in sponsoring and scrutinising and teaching those who had signed up and been elected by the church community.

Much has changed over the centuries – though our initiation services still retain many echoes of the past: turning from darkness to light, renouncing evil, praying that God will deliver the candidates from the power of darkness. The central symbols remain exactly the same – washing with water, anointing the candidates with the sign of the cross as a badge of their profession, the bishop commissioning them by laying his hands on their heads and praying for the strengthening of the Holy Spirit, sharing the light of Christ with them - little flames taken from the great new Easter flame, as they are sent out into the world to live out their vows and promises.

The big difference is that we now baptize infants as well as adults (as the early church had done, when whole households were converted to Christianity), and that means that for those baptized as infants, too young to make promises for themselves (their godparents and parents do this for them), baptism and confirmation have become separated. This causes a few theological puzzles about what exactly it is that is added at confirmation that is lacking in baptism. Although we have the idea that candidates confirm their baptismal promises from their own mouths, the central prayer says *confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit* - making it clear that this is something that God does, not we ourselves.

Another change is that we no longer insist on delivering a total training package before baptism or confirmation take place, because nowadays we say that we are committed to a lifelong process of learning about and growing into the Christian faith: baptism and confirmation are two key stages along the Way, but certainly not the last stage. (We say this, though we're not too good at it in practice: many youngsters disappear from the church once they have been confirmed, and many adult Christians remain stuck with a childish grasp of the faith – we have lost the deadly earnest of those early days. We need to be able to give at least as good an account of our faith, and the hope

that is in us, as our Muslim neighbours do of their faith.)

There is one very significant feature of the pattern of the service which I described. In those early centuries it happened at Easter – this was the only time for baptism (until the pressure of numbers made that impossible). The final stage of preparation was what we now call Lent, and the climax came at dawn on Easter morning, when the newly-baptized were led from their all-night vigil to the baptistery. Here they disrobed and went down into the waters of the font (that's why a separate place was needed, for reasons of decency). They put on a new white robe and were led into the church, to take their full place among the Christian assembly. In this way a very powerful link was made between the mystery of Easter – the dying and rising of Christ – and the mystery of baptism – which is our personal share in his resurrection. They took this link very seriously, and we do well to do the same. That is why, even when there are no candidates for baptism on Easter Day, we join in renewing our baptism vows. Baptism, whenever it is administered, is at its heart an Easter event.

This Easter some of us had a taste of this pattern, when **Maisie and Alfie Clements-Jones** were candidates for baptism and confirmation, and **Thomas Ramanoop** a confirmation candidate, at the great Easter vigil at St Paul's, along with 77 others. Their preparation has not been as long or as rigorous as in those early centuries - in fact because of everything else that has been happening here this Lent, most of their preparation is yet to come, after the event. But that's OK because of our commitment to ongoing learning and discipleship. And in the run-up to last night we prayed for them, supported them, and handed over to them four key texts of our faith: Christ's summary of the law, the Beatitudes, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, echoing the practice of the early church. And then came the great event. It didn't last all night, but it was lengthy - both serious and joyful. For the candidates who were not previously baptized, it was a single event of baptism and confirmation, with the bishop presiding, just as in the early church; for others it was the time when they renewed the vows of their infant baptism. They passed from darkness to light, and received the eucharistic bread and wine for the first time. **Congratulations** to our three, who made their vows confidently and with conviction.

Easter talk of death and resurrection is important for those who have experienced a bereavement. Christ is risen from the dead, he has drawn the sting of death, he goes before to prepare a place for us, the death of the body is not the end, his resurrection is the guarantee that those who follow him in life will follow him through the grave and gate of death. Although we grieve, we can trust that our loved ones are held in the embrace of his love, and we can know that in him the living and the dead are held together in one communion and fellowship. All this, and much more, is the Easter message to the bereaved.

But just as important, though less obvious, is the relevance of the death and resurrection of Jesus for those at the other end of their earthly life – for those in their early years as well as for those who have died. What does it mean to claim for them a share in Christ's dying and rising? If you'd been an adult in the early church – and the same was true for many of the adults at St Paul's Cathedral on Easter night - you would probably approach the font with a strong desire to renounce an old way of life, perhaps involving destructive and shameful habits: to die to sin and be raised to newness of life – to make a fresh start with Jesus, and all that people mean when they speak of being 'born again'. And even for those who are younger, it's the same, for we are talking about a daily and a lifelong process (or habit) of resisting sin and evil, of which baptism and confirmation is the beginning (which is what 'initiation' means, of course). Eternal life is not just beyond the grave; it is here and now, and is the Easter gift of Christ to all his people, from the cradle to the grave. It is that gift that we celebrate at Easter.

Annual Vestry & Parochial Church Meetings

Our annual business meetings were held after church on Sunday 10 April. At the Vestry meeting, Allan Ramanoop and Alex Nelson were duly nominated as churchwardens, and declared appointed

for a further term by joint consent of the Rector and people; we thank them for their dedicated service and wish them well for the coming year! Although 'deputy warden' has no legal status, we agreed it would be useful to have one, and asked the PCC to appoint one. This was the first annual meeting since 1944 at which Edith Wyeth was not present! We remembered her with love and thanksgiving, and are planning a development in church in her memory of which we hope she would have approved.

At the APCM, we elected Michael Page as our Deanery Synod representative (see below), and Kim Ali, Margaret Coulter, Susan Crocker, Toni Davey, Cathy Matthew, Richard Powell, Annadale Ramanoop, Danny Ramanoop and Sibyl Yates as members of the Parochial Church Council - welcoming Sibyl as a new member. The new PCC will appoint our Treasurer, Secretary and other officers.

The annual report and accounts for 2010 were presented and discussed. Our thanks to Richard Powell for putting together a comprehensive report, in the form required by the Charity Commission (you can read it on the website), and to Paul Kellaway for helping to clarify some details in the accounts (which are available on request from the Rector). Thanks were expressed to everyone else who works hard - often behind the scenes - for the well-being of our church.

Deanery news

Richard Powell and **Margaret Coulter**, together with the Rector, will attend their last Deanery Synod meeting on 12 May, when the proposed legislation to permit the ordination of women bishops will be discussed and voted on (every deanery, and every diocese, must do this and report back to General Synod where the final decision will be taken). This is not about whether we should have women bishops - that decision is already made - but the process by which this happens: are there sufficient safeguards for those who are opposed?

We thank Richard and Margaret for representing us in Tower Hamlets Deanery (Richard has also worked with other parish treasurers on Common Fund issues). For the future, under the new rules - designed to produce smaller synods - we will only have one representative, and **Michael Page** has agreed to take this on. With a new area bishop and archdeacon (the latter yet to be announced), there may be interesting times ahead.

The sad news in the deanery is that **Michael Peet**, Rector of St Mary and Holy Trinity Bow, died on 9 April, after a recurrence of cancer following an earlier battle coupled with a stroke (having made a determined return to work). Michael served for over 20 years in and around Bow; his enthusiasm even in adversity was infectious, and his church offered a warm and inclusive welcome to all. Having celebrated the 50th anniversary of George Lansbury (once a member of the congregation) in 2009 in fine style, he had planned the parish's 700th anniversary this year. We offer our sympathy to his partner Raymond and to a congregation who will miss him greatly. His funeral is on 5 May at 11am; there is a full obituary in the *Church Times* of 21 April.

Our deanery's **Archdeacon's Visitation**, at which churchwardens are formally admitted and PCC members pledge themselves to their responsibilities, will be on 31 May at All Saints Poplar. As we still have no archdeacon, Alan Green, our hardworking Area Dean, will officiate - he has served us well in his extra duties, and deserves to be relieved of them before long! Do attend if you can, to support our wardens.

70th Anniversary of the Blitzing of St George-in-the-East

We shall mark this anniversary at our service on Sunday 22 May - at which we will also be dedicating books and collecting bags given in memory of **Lally Britton** by her family - appropriately, given her lifelong connections with the East End and this church.

Parish news

Congratulations to **Arben** (Benny) and **Elona**, married at St George's on the afternoon of Palm

Sunday. Everyone, including the bride, had to walk to church because of Marathon road closures. The Marriage Act requires that weddings take place between 8am and 6pm (with draconian penalties for clergy who fail to comply) - we just made it!

Rodney Sawers, who was until some months ago a regular at the Tuesday eucharist (when he generally read the lesson), and sometimes on Sundays, has moved out of London to a place where his mental health problems can receive the help that he needs. Rodney, who hails from South Africa, has a strong faith and knows his Bible well; we hope that this will continue to give him strength, and we hope to keep in touch with him.

A **new flag** is flying from our tower - the old one had disintegrated over the winter. We gratefully acknowledge a donation to cover its cost, from someone who wishes to remain anonymous.

Many thanks to all who staffed our **Marathon** stalls - a bigger team than in previous years. Even without donations for use of our loos (which had become problematic) we raised £200 for Richard House, with a contribution to church funds as well.

Thanks also to those who **cleaned** the church and forecourt, and all the silver, on Easter Eve, and to **Marcus Cook**, who keeps the shrubs on the driveway neat and tidy, and tends the flower pots at the foot of the steps and on the church forecourt - the current display of pansies is very cheerful.

During Lent we 'shook the bucket' for **Water Aid** and supported the appeal for **ALMA**, our diocesan link with Angola and Mozambique. Coming up in May (15-21) is Christian Aid Week, for which envelopes will be available in church. The Archbishop of Canterbury has written to all churches asking us to support the work of Christian Aid, which serves the churches of 41 denominations in this country to bring about a vision to end poverty. This year's material is based on projects in Nicaragua. Here is the prayer they ask us to offer during the week:

*Loving God, believing that we are all made in your image,
we pray for justice, peace and an end to poverty.*

Believing in the miracle of your love, we pray for a dismantling of all systems that oppress.

Believing in the promise of creation made whole, we pray for the vision of a new earth.

*As we are made in your image, may we live in your image
and be Christ-like, in service, endurance and love.*

Concerts

Fred Thomas, a local musician, has put together with a group of friends an imaginative series of five concerts, combining contemporary (not all classical) and older music, and they will be performing them in church on 6 May, 4 June, 14 July, 14 August and 29 September. The first concert features the music of Bach, Feldman, Magic Lantern and the Chantilly Codex. Tickets are available on the door (£8, £5 concessions) and the performances begin at 8pm.

Looking ahead

On Saturday 18 June we have a parish excursion to **Elstow Abbey**, where Susan Crocker's brother is the Rector. We will travel by minibus and explore the Abbey and its surroundings, with lunch, time for reflection and for enjoying each others' company. More details to follow.

To mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, **Wilton's** are presenting a new play by Jonathan Holmes, *Into Thy Hands*, based on the life of John Donne, Dean of St Paul's. It runs from 31 May to 2 July, and flyers giving more details are available in church.