**Address for Renewal of Baptismal Vows at the Jordan Valley**

I recently read a story about King Louis IX of France: a great European monarch of the thirteenth century. When he was asked what he thought of his baptism, he said ‘I think more of the place where I was baptised than I do of Reims Cathedral where I was crowned king; for the dignity of a child of God, which was bestowed on me at baptism, is greater than that of a ruler of the kingdom. The latter I shall lose at death: the other will be my passport to everlasting glory’.

As we gather to renew our baptismal promises, some made ourselves as adults and others by our godparents on our behalf; some quite recent and others many years ago, I would like to reflect on what it means to be brought into the Christian family by baptism.

The collect near to the beginning of the baptism service in the Book of Common Prayer asks that the child who is about to be baptised ‘may be received into the ark of Christ’s Church; and being steadfast in faith, joyful through hope and rooted in charity may so pass through the waves of this troublesome world that finally he (or she) may come to the land of everlasting life’. That description takes up St Paul’s well-known words in the New Testament: ‘Faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love’ (1 Cor 13.13). Our baptism brings us into a new family whose life is (or at least should be) rooted in those three key values – or as they are sometimes termed ‘virtues’ – of faith, hope and love. So as we prepare ourselves to renew our own baptismal promises, I would like to offer some brief reflection on each of these.

The first key value is **faith**, the content of which is summed up in the Creed, which we will say together in a few moments. It is faith in **God the Father** who has created all things and holds them all in being, in **God the Son**, our Lord Jesus Christ, described by St Richard of Chichester, the patron saint of our diocese as our merciful redeemer, teacher, friend and brother, who died and rose again for us, and in **God the Holy Spirit** who works from within us to guide, strengthen and comfort us, whatever we may face in life.

Faith affirms that we are not here today by accident or because of the working of blind, impersonal forces. We are here today because God has made us and loves us, and that at our baptism he has called us to be his own – to be in relationship with him – even for many of us at a time when we were too young to be able to know that.

The second key value of the Christian family is that of **hope**, which looks towards the future in anticipation that God has good things in store for us. Despite the many opportunities and comforts that life in the modern western world provides, many of us find it hard to feel optimistic about the future, with daily news about economic crisis, threats to the environment, disease and war; in addition to personal anxieties that we may have.

But however optimistic or pessimistic we may feel about such things, the Christian family cleaves to the second key value of hope. Hope that, in the end, God holds the future; that his Kingdom is coming; that Jesus conquered death at Easter; that ultimately good will win out over evil, life over death and love over hatred.

The third and final value of the Christian family which goes together with faith and hope, but is greater than either of them is that of **love** or charity. Jesus himself places love at the heart of life. What is important above all else, he teaches his disciples, is the double love of God and of our neighbour (Mk 12.28-32; Mt 22.34-40; Lk 10.25-28). Amazingly and to many people bizarrely, he even says that we should try to love our enemies. This was the love that he himself showed when he was at his crucifixion, he prayed, ‘Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing’.

By love, he doesn’t primarily having feelings about another person. As the great Christian teacher and theologian St Thomas Aquinas taught, love is not essentially about our feelings but about our will. To love, he says is ‘to will the good of another’. For example, even when a mother is tired, exhausted and totally fed up with her baby and can find few warm feelings about him, she still wills his good; still loves him in this deeper sense.

The Christian faith is that, as is the case with babies, ultimately we are able to love because we have first been loved. ‘We love’ writes St John in the New Testament, ‘because (God) first loved us’ (1 Jn 4.19).

Perhaps we do not reflect enough on the day of our baptism and what it meant: I am certain that I personally don’t. So today is an opportunity to do just that. In the fifth century, St Augustine of Hippo, father of the western Church, after a long period of seeking and agonising, decided with some friends to be baptised. I’ll finish with his dramatic account of it:

And so we were baptised, and all our dread about our earlier lives dropped away from us. During the days that followed I could not get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled me as I meditated upon your deep design for the salvation of the human race. How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely I was moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled in my heart until it overflowed in loving devotion; my tears ran down and I was the better for them (Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.6.14).