All Saints, St Andrews 110115

The pencils are held aloft as a sign of the commitment to freedom of expression. Somewhere yesterday I began to see pencils held aloft in the sign of the cross – maybe as signs even in very secular France that a precious freedom is worth suffering and dying for. In a dreadful week, it has been impressive and moving to see the extent to which the people of France have been prepared to step forward and declare not just their abhorrence of the dreadful violence of this week but also their deep commitment to the values which they wish to protect.

I haven’t been altogether at ease with all of this. These issues and the feelings which they engender are very familiar to me – coming as I do from a place where the need to deal with fear and violence – and the fear of violence which is at least as potent as the thing itself – were but thankfully no longer are part of daily living. Yet I’ve found myself asking whether the right to mock the prophet Mohammed is a right which I would support. Is the freedom to commit blasphemy an essential freedom. I wondered too whether the Sony film which mocked the ruler of North Korea was an expression of a freedom worth defending. What seems to be at stake here is freedom of speech expressed as the right to satirise and to mock. I think I would place a higher value on the freedom – claimed by the church at its best – to speak truth to power. But the fact that the expression of a freedom may be somewhat graceless doesn’t mean that it isn’t worth defending – because the alternative is a society ruled by fear. Indeed the alternative is a society in which the determination of some to be insulted controls the right to freedom of expression.

Let’s take a big step and ask what if anything all this has to do with baptism on this Sunday. Baptism is the point of entry – we tend to say of initiation – into the community of faith. Baptism is carried out in the faith of the believer or of those who bring the person for baptism. And of course it is different things in different circumstances.

In the world of clergy, there is a tendency to say that ‘baptism is the new wedding’ You may have seen here family parties bring a child for baptism and dressed as if for Ascot – or for a wedding. And baptism has become a moment of thanksgiving for the birth of a child – a marking of the entry of a new member into a family group. It’s a special moment in the life of any family.

And I think of the pictures of Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, baptising adults by immersion in the centre of York on Easter Sunday. It’s dramatic and it’s meant to be – a washing away of sin and the taking on of a new life.

But beyond that, Jesus himself makes clear that baptism leads to a new way of life. When the brothers James and John ask to be seated next to Jesus in the life to come, Jesus points out that “the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” (Mark 10:39). To be baptized in Jesus is to follow him. In that sense, baptism is inextricably linked with a willingness to face death as an expression of faith. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led to his death, he said to one of the prison guards, “For some this is the end, but for me it is the beginning.”

So baptism is not a point of entry into spiritual privilege – although it is a sort of privilege. Rather it is initiation into a way of life in which life itself may be sacrificed in the cause of faith – baptised into the death of Christ that we may walk with him in the newness of his risen life.

In our world where it is all too easy for faith to be reduced to a comfortable belonging, it’s important for us to remember that the call to sacrifice lurks just below the surface of daily living. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of France and with all who are prepared to defend our essential freedoms today.

 …… we dedicate and bless this bell

That its sound my remind us of the holiness of the things of God

And call us to pious prayer in his name Amen