

**BISHOP GEOFFREY ROWELL'S SERMON AT THE CONFIRMATION
EUCHARIST, ST THOMAS BECKET CHURCH, HAMBURG,
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ITCHING EARS

**ST THOMAS OF CANTERBURY, HAMBURG, SUNG EUCHARIST AND
CONFIRMATION, TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, 2010**

“The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.” (II Timothy, 4,3-4)

In these letters, which we call the Pastoral Epistles, Paul writes to Timothy and Titus, teaching and instructing them as to how the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is to be handed on. As the church moved out in mission into the Mediterranean world, and spread beyond its Jewish roots, new questions were asked and new challenges faced. In the beginning Jesus had been proclaimed as the Messiah, the Saviour and Deliverer, expected by the Jewish people. Christians pointed to the way in which he fulfilled the Jewish scriptures; about how a crucified Messiah could be seen as pointed to by the prophet Isaiah, with his vision of the suffering servant of God. But new questions arose when the Gospel encountered the non-Jewish Greek world, and there was the continuing question as to how the Good news of God in Christ could be handed on. So it is not strange to find that one of the things that happened was that summaries of the faith began to emerge, so that when new Christians were baptised they were able to commit themselves to the way of Christian discipleship in confessing a short statement of the faith.

In our Confirmation service this morning I will ask all of you, together with those being confirmed, to profess the faith of the Church. In three questions I will ask about your belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and you will reply in the words of what we call ‘the Apostles Creed’. It is called that, not because it was composed by the apostles, but because it embodies the apostolic faith. It is in origin the old baptismal

creed of the Church of Rome. Christian faith is a commitment of trust and discipleship, our own personal response to Jesus calling of each one of us, as he called the first disciples, to 'follow me'. This is the way of life, this is the way of discipleship, to which I commit myself. But Christian faith is not only our personal putting our trust in Jesus and becoming his disciples, it is also that discipleship expressed as the faith in which we believe – the teaching of the truth about what God has done. The creed as a summary of this teaching gives us, we might say, the dimensions of discipleship.

When Jesus called the first disciples, they responded to that personal call to follow him, to be with him, to share his life. They did not know fully what that meant, they did not know where that following would take them – and, as the Gospels tell us, that following took them to a hostile Jerusalem, to Gethsemane where they slept through the Lord's agony, and then forsook him and fled, and then to the cross. But it took them also to Easter, to the overwhelming surprise of joy in the Garden of the Resurrection, and in the breaking of bread at Emmaus, and by the lake-shore in Galilee. It took them to the whirlwind and tongues of fire at Pentecost, when the life-giving Spirit of God blew them out into the world. And as they went out and spoke about Jesus they had to say what Jesus meant, and so the teaching became the creed, the belief, sometimes called the symbol of faith. Quite rightly this creed became the touchstone of Christian belief – this is what following Jesus was all about. St Paul, writing to Timothy, knows that Christians lived in a world in which all kinds of strange teachings abounded. He knows that it is all too easy to tailor the Gospel to our own needs. *Having itching ears they will accumulate themselves teachers to suit their own likings.* But the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is not something we invent, or tailor to our own needs, the Gospel is the faith of the Church, and the faith of the Church is expressed in the creeds. And the creeds remind us that our Christian faith is greater and richer than the faith of each one of us – *the length and breadth and depth and height* as St Paul puts it in his Letter to the Ephesians, where he goes on to tell us what it is all for: that we may *know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* That is stupendous and amazing, and yet it is true. To know the love of Christ and be filled with all the fullness of God is what it is all about.

In our Confirmation this morning you, Stella, Kullya, Kevin, Desmond and Homera, confirm your faith, respond to this amazing love and grace of God. This is a moment – a very special moment – in your life – and it is a special moment in the life of this church. You confirm your faith – you say this is the way of life I wish to follow, this is what I believe, Jesus is the one whose disciple I wish to be. You confirm your faith, but even more significantly God confirms your faith, gives you the life and strength of his Holy Spirit. In the prayer that I say over you I pray that God will grant you his holy Spirit: *the Spirit of wisdom and understanding; the Spirit of counsel and inward strength; the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness* – and I pray that your delight may be in the fear of the Lord – that your delight may be in the *awesome presence of God*. It is a prayer which comes from words of the prophet Isaiah which looked forward to Jesus, God’s Messiah, and those words are used about you. That prayer is then sealed for you personally as I anoint you with oil and lay on hands. The oil is an ancient sign. Kings and priests were anointed in the Old Testament by having a vase or jug of oil poured over them. The golden olive oil flowed down over their face and they shone. The oil was used for light, and it was the nearest you could get to pouring light over them. It was a sign of transformation. Jesus was the Messiah – and this simply means ‘the Anointed One’, and translated into Greek Jesus is the Christ, which again means the anointed ones. And Christians are therefore the anointed ones. As I sign you with oil and call you by name you are signed, sealed and delivered. In the early Syrian Church they saw the cross traced on the forehead in Confirmation as a cross of light which shone out to overcome all the powers of darkness. The laying on of hands is an ancient sign of blessing. Our hands are the most expressive things that we have after our faces, - a clenched fist speaks differently than an open hand, hands outstretched in embrace show the vulnerability of love, and the hands of Jesus held to the cross by nails show the cost of the love of God. In the Acts of the Apostles we read how the apostles laid hands on those who came to confess their faith – and that is what we do today.

But confirmation is not an end but a beginning. You are to go out and live the faith in which you believe. That means the imitation of Christ, loving with his love, serving others as he did. It means keeping close to Jesus, reading the Gospels, finding yourself in the stories of Jesus’ encounter with others. It means praying. (I remember, when I was Bishop of Basingstoke, giving a lift to a young man, who immediately asked me when he got into the car if I was a vicar. I told him I was a bishop, and he then said

can you teach me to pray. It was not a long drive so I taught him the prayer much used in the Eastern churches that we call the 'Jesus Prayer'. It is short, and you can use it with the rhythm of your breathing. *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.* When we got to Basingstoke I dropped him at a roundabout – a phrase I used when I got to the meeting to which I was going, and realised that it was true in a deeper sense – I dropped him at a roundabout in his life, but had given him words to help him on his journey no matter what exit from the roundabout he took). So keep praying if you are to live the Christian life. And in order to do so you need to keep on receiving the life of Jesus in this holy and wonderful sacrament. None of us can live without eating. None of us can live the Christian life without sharing in this sacrament of broken bread and wine outpoured in which Jesus promised to share his life with us. As we receive his life and strength we are transformed into his likeness and so can go out to share that life with others. May God bless you as you make your commitment this day, a day on which the Holy Spirit of God is given to you to change and strengthen your life.

The collect for today is a wonderful prayer for the day of your Confirmation, so let me pray these words again, and you may like to remember them and make them your own, words that remind you of your confirmation and commitment, and of the amazing grace of God.

God, the giver of life,

Whose Holy Spirit wells up within your Church:

By the Spirit's gifts equip us to live the gospel of Christ

and make us eager to do your will

that we may share with the whole creation

the joys of eternal life;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever. Amen