

Confirmation Service

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Date: 06 October 2002

Preacher: Stephen Hale

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 6th of October 2002. The preacher is Bishop Hale.

He's conducting the confirmation service and his sermon is based on Philippians chapter 3 verses 4 to 9.

Okay, well it's great to be here tonight and as I said it's terrific to be a part of this special occasion and it's great to see your building in progress like this. It's a work in progress. It must be nice to be getting to turn 4 because you're in the home straight and they're doing the finishing captures as opposed to the previous chaos.

So this is really impressive and what's happening out there is going to be excellent. I imagine your church is going to explode next year. If it's not exploding already.

I meant in terms of numbers of people coming. So it should be great to see what happens here at Holy Trinity. Well I recently read about a child prodigy in the United States.

[1 : 09] There's always good stories coming out of the United States if you're a preacher. And apologies to any Americans who might have in the congregation. It used to become a bit frustrating at Diamond Creek when I was in my last year because we had about 4 or 5 Americans join the congregation which meant I had to really curtail my illustrations from America which was pretty frustrating because the stories just keep coming.

And this was about a girl who was 8 years old and at the age she is old this girl had gained entrance to a university. She'd written a number of articles in prestigious journals. She'd won a number of international chess competitions and she had an IQ which was in an astronomical sort of stratosphere.

Well unfortunately it was all a hoax because when a journalist went to actually interview this girl and to meet this child prodigy she discovered that there was a child who'd virtually been locked up in her house could hardly read or speak and in fact that her mother through the internet had done all those things on the child's behalf.

Now I guess it was a sad story because the child as a result of that interviewer's request to see the child reported what had happened and the child was removed from her mother because she was in a vulnerable position.

Well I guess it illustrates in a bizarre but in an extreme way the fact that all of us have an incredible need to succeed. You've got a great need to succeed and so do I. Paul Barker does.

[2 : 28] That's why you're getting a bigger building. No, sorry. Sorry. We'll stick to the text. No, no. We all have an amazing need to succeed and that's one of those things that impels us or propels us as people, isn't it, to be successful and we live in a society in an era when successful people are really held on a very high pedestal in our community and in a sense Eddie Maguire is the sort of exemplar in our community of the successful self-made man came from Broadmeadows, lives in Toorak, someone who never ever has a bad day, always has good experiences even when his team loses the grand final although I did read in the paper today that someone suggested he should get over the socks that he's had all week this week because they'd lost.

So we all have this incredible need to succeed and I think one of the things that comes with this need to succeed and the emphasis on success in our community is what I consider to be an over-emphasis on the attitude that it all depends on you.

It all depends on you. And I think if you're living in the sort of context that most of you are living in as younger people today, you would hear people say things to you like parents and like school teachers or lecturers at university like only you can do the work, only you can sit the exam, only you can turn up for this interview, only you can make this project happen, only you can bring up your child if you're a parent in the very best possible way.

Because people who have kids these days make big decisions to have kids and they're under enormous pressure to be very successful as parents. Well in one sense all of this is true, isn't it? It all does in a sense depend upon you.

[4 : 07] Only you can sit an exam, only you can do the work, only you can be involved in this particular project. And to some extent whether you're successful or not does depend upon your efforts.

And I'm certainly not wanting to suggest sort of as Christians that we ought to just back off and drift through life in some way. But on the other hand I think for a lot of people this over-emphasis as I consider it on it all depends upon you leaves a lot of people I think feeling slightly overwhelmed.

If not somehow frozen with fear because they're anxious that they're going to fail. And so they therefore become depressed because they think they're actually not going to be able to succeed in the way that people think they should.

They can't really do it as well as capably as other people do. So therefore they become isolated and think that somehow it's all their issue. Because if it does all depend upon you and only you can do it then it is your issue, isn't it?

And no one else in a sense can help you out. And I'm personally convinced that one of the reasons why there is an epidemic event of depression amongst lots of young people with we're told a quarter of young people contemplating suicide is partly because of this over-emphasis on it all depends upon you.

[5 : 15] It leaves a lot of people feeling desperate and feeling anxious and feeling overwhelmed and feeling like they can't make it on those terms. And I think it's, while it's true, partly true, that it all depends upon you, it's only partly true.

So at the heart of the Christian experience I want to suggest tonight is the knowledge that you actually can't do it by yourself. That's why this is only a half-truth. Of course you know and I know that we're people who are made of flesh and blood.

You've got incredible strengths and an amazing potential to do great things. And you've also got weaknesses and an amazing capacity if unleashed to actually do things that aren't particularly helpful or in fact could be incredibly destructive or dangerous.

That's the nature of being a human being, isn't it? We're this incredible paradox as human beings, this strange mixture of good and evil. And one of the great things and liberating things to think about being a Christian is that we actually are honest and real about ourselves.

Already tonight in our gathering we've confessed our sins before God because as Christian people we're willing to acknowledge the fact that we mess up. We're willing to acknowledge the fact that we are people who fail and we're willing to acknowledge the fact that we're people who can't do it all on our own and that in a sense we can't make it on our own in our own strength.

[6 : 32] So that's part of being human, isn't it? Acknowledging that. And in Philippians chapter 3 which was read before for us, Paul talks about a radically different perspective to this all depends upon new attitude to life and living.

He talks about his former dependence upon external achievements, his radical new experience of life in Jesus Christ and his passion for living for Jesus Christ now that he's actually come into a living relationship with him.

So first off, Paul's former dependence on external achievements. Paul was an incredibly successful religious leader. His ecclesiastical career had been carefully planned and fulfilled with great detail and great meticulous care.

We're told that he was circumcised on the eighth day. I guess he didn't have much control over that but in actual fact the righteous fulfilling of the law was completed. He was born into the true Israel, a child of the family of the tribe of Benjamin.

He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, if you like, a true blue Jew in Australian terms. He was a Pharisee, someone who taught the law with enthusiasm. He was someone who was zealous, so zealous in fact that he persecuted the church and we read in Acts that he was standing by when the first Christian martyr was put to death, Stephen.

[7 : 44] And as well as that he was faultless. He claimed to have kept every letter of the law and all of the regulations that went with the law to perfection. So if it all depended upon your own efforts and it all depended upon your own achievements and it all depended upon you, then surely Paul was someone who fulfilled literally that philosophy of living because he in a sense had done it all.

But Paul goes on to say that he had this incredibly radical experience on the road to Damascus and as part of that he did an incredible turnaround in his life. And he says in this passage, Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Jesus Christ.

I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

See, Paul recognised the very heart of the Christian faith is that you can't do it all. He recognised that in a sense even though he'd attained all of the things that you needed to do to be a true blue Jew and to be right with God through human effort and attainments, that that in fact didn't get him right with God, that that wasn't enough.

He recognised that he couldn't rely upon his own achievements, that it didn't depend upon him and him alone and that you can't forget right with God by what you do and that none of us in a sense are good enough even if we try really, really hard.

[9 : 08] I was a little distressed this week. I was in Perth for the National Anglican Schools Conference and because I was in Perth we had a lot of speakers from the Anglican Church in Perth and at one of the presentations we heard was a man who's an eminent person in the Diocese of Perth, not the Archbishop I need to hasten to add and this particular person gave this talk and you need to bear in mind the context.

The context was a whole lot of Christian heads of schools, Anglican schools from across Australia, people who are heads or chairs of school councils and school chaplains and other hangers-on like me who chair Anglican school committees in Victoria and so there was a very good group of people there in this context and this guy got up and said, well listen, he said there's basically been two different strands in Christian thinking.

There's what's called the Pauline Strand which has sort of got its attractions and is held by a large number of people which is the view that you have this sort of light on the road to Damascus type experience.

You actually recognise that you actually need God's forgiveness and you ask Jesus Christ to forgive you and he comes into your life and you have a radical life-changing experience. He said that's one view. The other view is what he called the Johannine view which is based on supposedly John's Gospel in which he said he was attracted to which is the view that you demonstrate your relationship with God by obeying God and that's how you show that you love God because if you love me you'll obey my commandments and so therefore he suggested that actually Christian faith is about practical action and practical lifestyle and ethical decisions that we make.

Well, I thought it was a little inadequate as a presentation and in fact extremely unhelpful because what he appeared to me to be saying to a group that are very well intentioned in many cases committed people but in other cases people who are probably God-fearers and people who in a sense have a faith in God but believe that through good efforts you'll be right with God was that that's how you do it.

[10 : 58] That if you're good enough you're good enough and if you try hard enough you'll be right with God and if you actually do good deeds that God will accept those good deeds and you'll be right with him. Well, the reality is that none of us are good enough in ourselves and all of us are people through our own attainments can only get so far because we actually need God's help in our lives.

We make it with God not by our own attainments but because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ and on the cross Jesus Christ stood in our place and actually bore the punishment that you and I deserve for the sins that we've committed so that we could be made right with God.

So instead of us being punished Christ was punished on our behalf and instead of us actually in a sense being rejected by God Christ was rejected so that we could stand freely in God's presence as people who come before him as people who've been forgiven because we acknowledge our failure and weakness people who've actually had our lives renewed and transformed through God's Holy Spirit and people who stand justified and declared in the right not because of what we've done but because of what Jesus has done for us and that's the radical nature of the Christian faith because it's actually about God's grace expressed in our lives.

In a sense it's pretty easy for me to say that it's by God's grace and not your own efforts but in actual fact the hardest thing to really accept as a Christian is that it's not your efforts that make you right with God it's what Jesus has done for you and you can understand the concept but it's very hard to actually put it into practice isn't it because all of us naturally are attuned to think that somehow it's what we do that makes us right with God.

If we come to church a lot or if we try really hard to be good or if we in a sense study the Bible really hard and get lots of biblical knowledge as important as that is that that somehow will make us right with God.

[12 : 48] Well none of those things will make us right with God in themselves. The thing that will make us right with God is Jesus Christ and his action on our behalf and our receiving that action on our behalf by putting our trust and confidence in him.

It's simple but incredibly hard to do to depend upon Jesus alone and to acknowledge that it's through dependence upon him alone that God's grace flows freely to us and therefore we come into a new relationship with him.

And that's why Paul says I consider everything lost compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. He was willing to spurn and reject everything in his life and to consider all of his attainments to be insignificant and nothing in fact worth discarding, worth completely abandoning in order to be able to stand knowing Jesus Christ and Christ as his Lord.

So for those being confirmed and baptised tonight you're actually going to stand before us and say I turn to Christ and I repent of my sins. And that's an acknowledgement by you isn't it?

That you recognise that it's only through turning to Christ and turning away from your sins that you can be in a right relationship with God. And so you're going to be confirmed in a sense in God's grace which we believe you've already experienced so that you'll actually be confirmed in your knowledge that God's overflowing love which is undeserved and which you haven't earned in any way has actually been applied to your life so that you now stand right before God.

[14 : 13] And we hope tonight will be a significant experience of confirmation in the sense that you'll be confirmed in your faith and confirmed in the Holy Spirit's presence in your life. And you're going to respond by saying that you turn to Christ and you're going to actually seek to live for him by relying upon him alone.

And I hope that as a church this will be an encouragement to you to see people standing before this congregation saying that they turn to Christ and that they repent of their sins. And as they do that I hope that will be a reminder to you of the very heart and basis of your faith.

And if we come to share in the Holy Communion I hope that that will be a reminder again that it's actually through Christ and Christ alone and what he's done on our behalf that we can be made right with God.

The other great thing about all of this is that actually we are transformed because we start to live life not in dependence upon our own actions but in dependence upon God. And we get to live life as it's meant to be lived in partnership and in relationship with God.

Not independently as if we're autonomous individuals who are just here to do what we feel like in this universe but people living in relationship with God which is how he intended it in the first place.

[15 : 23] Earlier this year there was a new bishop appointed in Melbourne in the Catholic Archdiocese and in the midst of the crisis that has beset the Catholic Church and to some extent the Protestant and Anglican churches in the course of this year about sexual abuse which you'd have to suggest has been a pretty difficult issue for anyone in the church in leadership.

His response was to say look the only good and beautiful thing the Catholic Church has to say is Jesus. And I guess what he was trying to say is that when you strip it all away and get behind all of the sort of palaver and all the problems that we have in any of the churches the thing that really matters and it's at the heart and the essence of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ.

And nothing in a sense really else matters much does it? We're in the midst of synod at present. Well that's not significant in comparison to knowing Jesus Christ and knowing him personally.

So it's your joy to know Christ personally if you're being confirmed tonight and baptized and if you're a believer and member of this congregation and it's your privilege as a church to proclaim Christ isn't it? To help people to be liberated from this burden and bondage to thinking that somehow it all depends upon you and that only through your own efforts can you be successful.

Well throwing out of all of this for Paul there was a passion for living. If Christ is at the very centre of our experience as Christian people and it's through his actions that we're made right with God then Paul goes on to say that we'll want to grow in our knowledge of Christ.

[16 : 47] For those of you who are being confirmed and for all of you who are part of this church or who might be visiting tonight I wonder whether that's your desire to grow in your knowledge of Christ. And you ought to count it a great privilege if you're in this church that you're in a church where people are being regularly and faithfully and incredibly helpfully taught God's word and in a way that's powerful and understandable and accessible because that's a rich privilege.

And unfortunately there are lots of churches where that isn't the case. An increasing number of our churches I think are rediscovering the importance and the need for strong biblical teaching as well as small group study and other study in different ways.

But you've got that incredible privilege at this church to have a very gifted preacher and teacher and your pastor in Paul as well as the other Paul as well as other people who preach and teach here.

And that is an incredible privilege which you ought to take lightly and you ought to lap up every opportunity that's available to grow in your knowledge of Christ. But secondly you'll experience the power of his resurrection we're told because in a sense you die to your old life and you rise to a new life.

And when you move into the new church and you're facing the other way and someone's able to be baptised by going to the baptistry that'll be symbolised won't it? Because they'll go down into the waters symbolising they're putting to death their old life and rise out of the waters symbolising the resurrection power and transformation that's taken place.

[18 : 09] And one of the great things about becoming a Christian person is not only getting right with God through God's grace and through Christ it's that God gives us the Holy Spirit. And not only do we in a sense get liberated from thinking that somehow we all have to do it in our own strength and our own way God actually helps us through the Holy Spirit to live in the new way he wants us to live.

He doesn't in a sense say you get to experience my grace through Jesus and now you've got to actually do it all yourself. He gives us the Holy Spirit and the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit to actually live in a new way so that we can be transformed.

And that's why as Alex was sharing tonight he was talking about the fact that when you pray you receive God's help don't you? And you're assisted by the Holy Spirit to actually live in a new way.

When you're feeling tempted the Holy Spirit's there to assist you to resist that temptation. And as you seek to strive for Christ you're conscious that it's his help and his upholding that helps you to live for him.

And then thirdly Paul says as part of this passion for living we'll enter into the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings by a life of sacrifice and service. Service of God and service with God's people.

[19 : 19] And one of the chief defining characteristics of any committed Christian person is that there are people who are willing to get involved in service. service and that ought to be a hallmark of any person who's committed to Christ.

So if you know Christ's forgiveness and transforming grace in your lives and you've received the Holy Spirit then that will flow over into Christian service because you'll want to give your life away to God and you'll want to give your life away to people as you seek to serve him.

And I hope that that'll be something that characterises each of you as Christian people. And I want to suggest that in lots of churches these days people are actually abandoning a commitment to service because their lifestyle is so frenetic and so busy that they've actually given little space left over to serve.

Well I don't think that's a good place to be and a good way to be as a Christian person because one of the great ironies and one of the great benefits of Christian service is it actually liberates you from the tyranny of overwork and it helps you to get life back into perspective because you get to see what life's really about which is serving God and serving God's people and the community in which you're placed.

If any of you have seen the film Molokai it's a great film I think that's just finished its run here in Melbourne at a number of cinemas and you should see it when it comes out on video. It's a story of a Catholic priest his name was Father Damien and at the beginning of the film there's a group of priests who are gathered in a chapel in the main island in Hawaii and the bishop is saying to this group of priests who are gathered together that there's a mission to be undertaken on the island of Molokai which was part of the Hawaiian group and on this particular island of Molokai there was a colony of lepers.

[20 : 54] The film said at the end of the 19th century and in those days to go to a colony of lepers meant that you would not be able to come back because you would be infected with leprosy and therefore not able to enter into the mainstream community.

So at the very outset of the film this Father Damien who's a Belgian priest volunteers to go to Molokai and at the age of 46 after 16 years in this colony having contracted leprosy himself he dies as a young priest.

It's an incredibly powerful and incredibly moving film because it depicts his compassionate and committed and devoted service to those people as he seeks to bring Christ's love to them. And he explains what he was on about by saying all men are lepers but if we come to Christ and follow his way he will give us peace.

And that's the liberating response isn't it to it all depends upon you. We're all lepers aren't we in a sense. We're all people who are in a sense applaud. We're all people who have got messy aspects in our lives that need fixing up.

And it's through Christ and Christ alone that we can receive grace and peace and healing. It doesn't all depend upon you. It depends upon what Christ has done and your response to what Christ has done.

[22 : 05] And if you want to be liberated both in terms of your relationship with God now then you ought to turn to Christ as those who are going to be confirmed and baptized will say later. And you ought to in a sense open your arms to him so that you can receive his forgiveness and be liberated and brought into a new situation and given the Holy Spirit so that you can live in a new way.

May God help all of us to accept that grace and live in the power of that grace in our lives. Amen.