

# St Luke's in the City

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

29 July 2007

## Celebrating at the Crossroads

Dear Friends,

*If we are over a certain age there is a fair chance that we were baptised as infant and confirmed as we entered teen years. Some lament the apparent demise of confirmation, fondly remembering 1950s, 60s and 70s armies of pre-pubescent boys and girls lined up in their Sunday best, bulging attendances. When the bishop made his confirmation visit we could feel as though the next generation of churchgoers was guaranteed. Nostalgics seemed to have overlooked, however, the fact that very few of the soldiers of that child army attend churches any more! Confirmation was also the 'meal ticket', the passport to communion. Infants and small children were baptised, but were deliberately excluded from eucharist. Confirmation was the adolescent rite of passage into an adult world, and therefore probably also doubled as an initiation rite, a remnant of pre-modern wisdom. Among Anglicans confirmation came to symbolise 'full membership of the church'. However 20<sup>th</sup> century liturgical and ecumenical movements have shifted the emphasis back onto baptism as the one and only sacramental sign of belonging. And because of that re-centering on baptism it no longer makes sense for confirmation to be the meal-ticket. Eucharist is for all the baptised- regardless of age, qualification, intelligence, soundness of mind, colour, wealth, gender, sexuality, ethnicity – or any other distinction which legalmindedness may construct!*

*Confirmation has a complex history. There have been a wide variety of practices and various symbolic elements to the rite, across the centuries and the different parts of the church. Among those facts on which historians agree is that confirmation arose out of practical necessity. The early baptismal rites included submersion in water, anointing with oil, the presentation of light, the laying on of hands, invocation of the Holy Spirit. The bishop baptised. But with the expansion of the church, numerically and geographically, the number of baptism candidates outstripped the number of available bishops. As the bishop's local 'cure of souls' the priest was delegated to wash with water, and in some instances to anoint with oil. But the bishop would come later, to anoint and lay on hands as a 'completion' of what was begun in baptism. The distance between the two parts of the rite grew from weeks to years, and eventually (and with a very much more complicated history!) resulted in two completely separate sacramental actions. As always, theological justifications follow practical necessity. Earlier in this series I argued that faith is always mediated through sacrament, because we are bodily, because matter matters. Regardless what the historical differences of opinion may be about origins and development of confirmation, the fact remains that the fleshy episcopal laying-on of hands tangibly expresses the sealing of the Holy Spirit and the ratification of adult discipleship as those baptised sent for mission in the name of Christ crucified and risen. Some may feel moved to make that confirmation. Others may feel moved to re-affirm the same.*

With my love,  
David