

## Admission of Baptized Children to Communion

### Sermon for Holy Trinity September 9th 2007 Robert Innes

We are told that the Christian life is a journey. The earliest Christians described themselves as followers of the Way. For parents of young children, journeys have a different meaning. You may think of hours waiting around in a hot and stuffy airport trying to think of ways of occupying the little ones. Or, after frantically packing the car for two hours, watering the plants, taking the cat to the cattery you head off onto the motorway and after four minutes comes the immortal phrase: “are we nearly there yet?” Small children have little idea of the stress involved in a journey or the timescales involved. But they travel with us on physical journeys and on the Christian journey through life.

Today we think about the question of children and holy communion. In particular: should we admit baptized children to communion before they are confirmed? It is a question which is very much tied up with our understanding of the Christian journey. Is sharing in Holy Communion a reward for progress along the journey, or is it food that strengthens us for the journey? Should we give the bread and the wine only to those who *already have* a mature, adult understanding or is it a means for helping us *grow* in maturity and understanding?

There is no mention in the New Testament of children sharing in communion. But we can be sure that they did. Our Christian faith has its roots in the Jewish faith which is highly inclusive of children. The Christian communion service has its roots in the Jewish passover in which children have important speaking parts. And Jesus specifically welcomed the children: “Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Children are a part of the kingdom, full members of the church *now*, they don’t have to wait until they grow up.

For the first 1500 years of the church’s history, it was, in fact, quite usual for the children to receive communion with the adults. In the Eastern Orthodox churches children still receive communion from infancy. In the Roman Catholic church, children receive their first communion at around age 8. But in the English church out of a sense of reverence for the elements, and out of a desire to educate the population, it became the practice in the middle ages to link communion with confirmation. It is this link between communion and confirmation which many people, including our Archbishop Rowan, are encouraging us to question and re-think. Should baptized children be able to receive communion once they have some understanding of the sacrament, or should they have to wait until they are confirmed?

The traditional practice of the Church of England was set out in the Book of Common Prayer and in the liturgy written by Thomas Cranmer at the Reformation. Cranmer’s strategy was to improve the general education of the people of England by insisting on a high level of learning for people preparing to be confirmed and by requiring that you had to achieve this level before you could take communion. So we read in the Prayer Book these words:

“As soon as children are come to a competent age, and can say, in their mother tongue, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the 10 Commandments, and also answer other questions of the catechism, they shall be brought to the bishop for confirmation.

And there shall be none admitted to the holy communion until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.”

Cranmer’s reasoning was clear. He didn’t want people to understand Holy Communion in a magical or superstitious way. He wanted them to be well instructed. And he thought this could be achieved if you required people to be confirmed before taking communion and set a reasonably demanding national syllabus for confirmation preparation.

Well you might say those were the good old days when children really had to learn there lessons. But I’m afraid even in Cranmer’s day, it wasn’t always effective. The Reformer Martin Bucer said: “not a few children utter these professions of faith with no more understanding than a parrot uttering his ‘hallo’”

And what about today? Well, if this morning, to receive communion we had to demonstrate that you knew the creed, the Lord’s prayer, the 10 commandments and the catechism off by heart how many of us would that leave? It wouldn’t include me for a start! Times have changed bit since the 16th century. Firstly, we have a different understanding of Christian education. We now understand that the welcome and initiation of children involves at least as much a sense of emotional *belonging* as it does intellectual *believing*. Whatever facts you might drill into a child in a classroom count for little if they don’t feel church is somewhere they belong. And secondly, we know that confirmation of young teenagers doesn’t always work well. Confirmation too frequently functions, in many European countries as well as England, as a kind of “passing out ceremony”. 12 year old children are usually not really old enough to understand the kinds of commitments that are asked of them in confirmation. In too many cases, a child dresses up for the ceremony, receives lots of presents, and isn’t seen in church again.

And so people are asking whether we should do things differently. And if Thomas Cranmer were around today, I’m sure he would agree. A much better strategy, on educational and pastoral grounds seems to be to prepare children to receive communion at a young age, say aged 8, and then to encourage them to feel a part of the church, so that they can make professions of faith for themselves as young adults, at say aged 16 or 17. This reflects better the emotional and intellectual development of children and young people.

Now for many of us here this won’t sound very radical at all. If you come from a Roman Catholic or American Episcopalian background this will be what you are already used to. Or you may come from one of the growing number of parishes in England where children are admitted to communion. But there will be others who feel uneasy and concerned. Change to church practices often touches us in a surprisingly deep way. It can sometimes feel that a pattern which worked for us is being abandoned, or that insights that we hold to strongly are being disregarded. I hope you won’t feel like this, but let me briefly address three main areas of concern.

The first is ‘why change what we are doing now?’ Change is always time consuming and often difficult. Can’t we just leave things alone? Well, in our church, Holy Communion is a central part of our worship and our children are present when we share in communion. To exclude baptized, believing children from sharing fully in it,

contradicts what they learn in other aspects of church life: that they belong, that they are loved, valued and welcomed in the body of Christ. Changing this area of church practice would convey a strong and positive message about the value of our children and the inclusiveness of our church. So I believe it could well be worth the effort.

The second concern is over whether children will sufficiently understand. Actually children often understand more than we realise. I was hearing only this week of a 7 year old child who gave an account of why she believed in God to a little friend who she discovered was an atheist. In the case of Holy Communion few even of us adults would dare to claim a complete understanding. Surely what matters isn't a full understanding, but knowing and loving Jesus. And children are just as capable of that as adults, sometimes more so. For both adults and children, understanding grows with participation. We learn by doing more than by hearing. That's what this change seeks to enable.

And thirdly, people may wonder what is going to happen to confirmation. You could say, 'why bother getting confirmed if you can take communion anyway?' I think that confirmation is properly seen as the opportunity to make a mature commitment to follow Christ. In practice that's how it already works at Holy Trinity – most of our confirmation candidates are either older teenagers or adults. Making confirmation the 'gateway to communion' confuses this purpose. We would hope that receiving communion will nurture the faith of our children to the point where they want to make such a commitment, not simply as a matter of tradition or out of family expectation, but as young adults in their own right. Admitting children to communion actually strengthens the meaning of confirmation.

But this sermon isn't intended to give all the answers, it's more the start of a process of consultation. The question of admitting children to communion has been considered by our Church Council and by our sister churches in the Anglican Council of Belgium. Today I am inviting our church congregations to begin thinking about it. It's a significant change, and if we make it we won't do it lightly or inadvertently, but soberly, reverently and after serious thought.

To help you in your thinking, you'll find at the back of church an information leaflet that you are welcome to take home. There are also questionnaires and comment sheets that you are welcome to fill in and return. If you need more information, you'll find a copy of this sermon, other relevant sermons, and the General Synod guidelines on this subject on our church web-site. I will also plan to meet with parents and families, because they are the people who are particularly affected.

I should say that, in practical terms, there is a lot of work to do. We would have to be clear just how much of the service we wanted our children to be present for. We would have to choose and run a suitable education course. We would have to decide on a minimum age for admission. Our Council would have to consider how people feel and then take a vote. Finally we would then need to present a case to our bishop, who would decide whether or not this kind of change should be permitted. All of that will take many months.

I should say that admission of baptized children to communion will not *require* children to receive communion. Each child and each family will need to make that

decision for themselves. There may be some who wish to delay receiving communion until they are older, and that is just fine. There may be some who don't wish their children to be baptized until they are adults, and who then won't receive communion until they are adult. Holy Trinity is a diverse place with many different Christian traditions. What we would be doing is simply giving formal permission for baptized children to receive communion, after suitable preparation, if they wish. It is about permission giving and increasing freedom, not about forcing new patterns upon people.

Let me draw to a close. Our archbishop says this: "slowly we have been learning that we are a community for all, not only for the elderly, or the articulate, or for the 'mature' - not even just for teenagers. If there are risks, they are worth taking for the sake of really sharing Christ's life in his body with the children whose company he loved on earth and loves still." Of course this is an area where people hold different views. My own experience, both within my family and in my ministry, has been that admitting baptized children to communion has been a positive experience, for the children, for their families and for the whole church. So I hope that as a church we will be able to consider and reflect on this issue sensitively and prayerfully. We remember Jesus words: "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Whatever the outcome, may this process of reflection lead us to a new valuing of children and a fresh appropriation of Jesus teaching.