

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Confirmations at St George's Silvertown**  
**25 October 2009**

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Jer 31:7-9  
Psalm 126  
Heb 5:1-6  
Mark 10:46-52 – NRSV

May I speak in the name of God, who calls us to himself with gentleness and love.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of God of St George's Silvertown, dear confirmands – let me say again what a pleasure it is to be with you this morning.

Thank you, Father Joshua, thank you wardens, for inviting me to be here. Thank you everyone, for your warm welcome.

Presiding at Confirmations is one of the great privileges of being a bishop – and since I became a parent, I have felt it even more keenly.

As human parents, we mark the milestones of our children's first steps, the first words, the first day of school – and, something I have not come to yet with my children, the first time we wave goodbye and they go off to live as independent adults.

Today confirmation is about the children of God taking a step into a new maturity – owning your own faith for yourselves; standing up and saying 'Yes, I take this decision about the rest of my life – I am going to be a follower of Jesus. This is my commitment – to live the life of worship witness and service to which he calls me; and with God's help, I will stick with it all the days of my life.'

And it also gives my heart such a delight to be able to declare the commitment that God himself in his turn makes to all of you.

In baptism he has received you (or will receive you, as you are baptised today) into his church; and he has made you a member of the Body of Christ, his true child, and inheritor of his kingdom.

And now he pours out his Spirit on you in a new and fresh way – so that every single day, you can know that he will be with you:

- to help you live your life well;
- to guide you in the choices and decisions you make;
- to give you the courage to say and do the right thing, even when it is difficult or unpopular;
- and to pick you up if you fall – no, *when* you fall, for all of us mess up and go on messing up, throughout our lives.

For God's promise is, that, if we put our trust in him, if we walk on the journey of life with our hand in his, he will never, never leave us.

No matter what goes wrong, no matter how often or how badly we mess up, no matter if we ignore him for days or weeks or months or years – he is there, always there, ready to help us back onto our feet the moment we're ready to receive his help.

And he'll give us a fresh start, a new beginning, and point us in the right direction, and lead us on the journey ahead.

This is God's promise to you who are being confirmed today – and the same promise holds true for everyone here who has been confirmed in the past.

God does not break his word – he's still there for you, no matter what.

The strength of God's love is illustrated in the gospel reading we have just heard – the lovely story of Blind Bartimaeus.

Now, I want you to sit back, close your eyes, and imagine that you were there that day.

Imagine you are in Jericho. Lying in the Jordan valley, it is a town of dry and dusty streets – though there is an oasis nearby.

And the long road leads out of town towards the hills of Jerusalem.

Here comes Jesus – on his way to Jerusalem. Actually, it is his last journey to Jerusalem, because soon after he arrives, he will be arrested and crucified.

He has just told the disciples that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Perhaps he realises what lies ahead of him.

But the disciples do not - nor do the crowd around him.

They probably haven't grasped what Jesus has been saying – as we heard in last week's gospel reading – that anyone who wishes to become great must be as a servant; whoever wants to come first must be the slave of all.

They still think that the people they consider important come first, and the people they look down on come last.

It is a clear hierarchy – rich and powerful and educated at the top, poor and weak and uneducated at the bottom.

And now here they all are – coming to the outskirts of the town.

What do we find?

There, at the side of the road, like the guy at the robots on the Klipfontein Road, is a beggar.

He's hoping for some generosity from the travellers.

Perhaps they are in a holy frame of mind as they set out for Jerusalem, and might be kind.

Perhaps they are off to the city with money to spend, and could spare some change.

It's a good place to beg.

And this poor chap needs help more than most – for he is blind.

No social security grant for him!

And all the local people know who he is – he is just Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.

They know him, and they know the place he has in society.

But Bartimaeus knows things too.

He has heard that it is Jesus who is coming – and he knows that Jesus cares about the poor and needy, and he knows Jesus can even heal people too.

And so Bartimaeus refuses to 'know his place'.

He won't just sit there, silently, as Jesus passes by.

He opens his mouth and he shouts 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

Imagine the scene – there he is, shouting away, and some in the crowd are telling him to shut up and be quiet. Well, he's only a beggar.

In your imagination, where are you in what is going on?

Who do you identify with this morning?

How strange it is that, though we know this story so well, we still so often give the impression that Church is only for the respectable and well-behaved!

How often we need to do a reality check, and make sure we are not excluding people who don't fit into our standards of living and behaviour – preferring them to stay silent, and keep their distance, on the outskirts of our lives and church.

We don't want awkward people, people with problems, coming in and upsetting how we do things.

On the face of it, perhaps this is understandable. Perhaps it makes sense.

But it's not Jesus' way.

Jesus heard blind Bartimaeus calling.

Jesus stopped.

Jesus stood still.

Jesus said to the people around him 'Call him here.'

And Jesus still says to the people around him 'Call him, call her, here.'

Is that so hard?

Jesus is not asking them to solve the guy's problems, or to take responsibility for him for goodness knows how long.

All Jesus says is 'invite him to come to me.'

This is the heart of the life of the Christian – to help others hear Jesus' invitation that they should come and meet him.

So, if today, you identify with the disciples, or with the wider crowd of people who follow Jesus – this is the message to you.

Be a person who says to others 'Take heart, get up, Jesus is calling you' – no matter who they are.

And did you hear how Jesus' followers have begun to get the message of what Jesus is about?

Beforehand they'd [quote] 'ordered him sternly to be quiet' [unquote].

But now it is not an order, now it is not stern – it is an invitation, and comes with words of encouragement.

As our second reading said, Jesus, a high priest like the high priests of the Jerusalem Temple, is able to deal gently with any one of us – even if we are ignorant or wayward – because he understands what it is to be a human being, with all our weaknesses.

And so we too, only human ourselves, must say to others, with compassion, 'Take heart, get up, he is calling you.'

Warm words – warm words for anyone who today identifies more with Bartimaeus than with the crowd.

Or perhaps, even though you feel you're part of the crowd, you know that there's a touch of Bartimaeus within you.

Perhaps in your life you feel there is poverty – not just material poverty, but spiritual or emotional poverty.

Perhaps in your life there is blindness – you can't see the way ahead for yourself.

The message is the same 'Take heart, get up, Jesus is calling you.'

What happens next?

Blind Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, and springs up and comes to Jesus.

Is there anything you have to throw off, in order to get up and come to Jesus?

What is holding you back?

Is there some habit, some attitude, something about your life, your lifestyle, you need to let go of?

So often Jesus' invitation to us comes with a challenge.

Do you dare to answer his challenge, and throw off, throw away, say goodbye to, whatever keeps you from coming to Jesus?

Well, Blind Bartimaeus is so glad that he is being called by Jesus, he has the courage to throw his cloak aside, and spring up, and rush to him!

Then Jesus asks him, 'What do you want me to do for you?'

Of course, Jesus knows his wants, Jesus knows his needs – Jesus sees right down into the deepest ache within him, and his heart overflows with compassion.

But Jesus isn't just going to wave a magic wand and give Bartimaeus a winning lottery ticket!

Bartimaeus has to admit what it is he needs. He has to admit his dependency on Jesus.

And it is a high risk thing he asks – because he knows that if he gets his sight back, he has no excuse to carry on begging.

He'll have to take new responsibility for his life from then on.

But he's prepared to do it.

So he asks Jesus to let him see again.

And he is prepared to take the consequences of Jesus healing him.

This too is a lesson for us.

Wouldn't it be easier if Jesus solved all our problems, but then let us just carry on in the comfortable old ways, perhaps with our comfortable old bad habits!

But no – he deals with us, and then he asks something of us.

He offers us healing and wholeness, but then he wants us to go forward with him, for Jesus is the 'three mile an hour' God who says 'follow me'.

Have you heard this phrase before?

Jesus is always going forwards, always asking us to follow him, always calling us onwards on the journey on which he wants to take us.

He goes ahead of us at 3 miles an hour – not so fast that we can't keep up, but steady enough that if we do not follow, we will be left behind!

St Mark tells us that Jesus said to Bartimaeus 'Go, your faith has made you well' – and immediately he regained his sight and followed him; he followed Jesus on the way.

Confirmation is about our commitment to follow Jesus on the way.

If you are being confirmed today, or if you were confirmed years ago – or even if you have been thinking about being confirmed, but keep putting it off – the challenge from Jesus is to follow him on the way.

Whether you are one of the crowd, or whether you are like Blind Bartimaeus – will you follow him, even on the road to Jerusalem, where difficulty and danger may lie ahead?

Take heart, though, it is his journey, and he will guide you safely.

So come now to him for reassurance, for healing, for wholeness – and for sustenance to feed you as you travel with him.

This is what we celebrate each week in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist means many things to us – but certainly one of them is that Jesus feeds us – he feeds us with his very self, so that we have his own strength to help and encourage us to follow him, day by day.

So come today to the altar rail, as Blind Bartimaeus came to Jesus.

Hear the warm words calling you to him.

Have the courage to throw off whatever is holding you back.

Come before him, and acknowledge your need of him, your dependence upon him.

Let him feed you. Let him bring you healing and wholeness. Let him speak to your deepest needs and wants and hopes and fears.

Receive him in your hands, receive him in your very self.

And then get up, and follow him.

Amen.