



Confirmation Hymns

Short Guide No 24: Confirmation Hymns

'Confirmation' covers various approaches to Christian initiation and commitment. When adults make a commitment and are received into membership of the church, the act of worship surrounding it can be a celebratory, evangelistic, sacramental expression of unity, and the hymns have a vital role to play in the blend of joy, hope and affirmation that a Confirmation should be.

Adult Baptism, Confirmation and Reception into Membership

For the purposes of this discussion, 'confirmation' refers to any public liturgical celebration at which members or baptised Christians commit themselves to discipleship as a landmark on their journey of faith. Confirmation in some denominations is a necessary sequel to baptism, which may have occurred in extreme youth, or only a matter of minutes earlier, such that some adults are baptised and confirmed at the same service. This is becoming increasingly common due to the decline in infant baptisms: in 1980 one in three infants was baptised into the Church of England, but by 2011 that had fallen to around 10 per cent. The total number of baptisms (children and adults) fell from 266,000 in 1980 to 140,000 in 2011. This followed a similar trend in the Roman Catholic Church between 1964 and 1977. Alongside the confirmation of the baptismal vows comes the reception into full 'membership' of the church with the welcome to full participation at the Lord's Table. (However, in the Roman Catholic Church, confirmation and the receiving of 'first communion' are often separated by a number of years, such that sacrament precedes deeper teaching). In the Church of England, confirmation is a necessary requisite for being a Godparent, and is a sign of membership that carries not only the right but also the expectation of participation in Holy Communion.

Historically, after the Christianisation of Rome in the early 4th century, only bishops would baptise, but with the mass acceptance of Christianity, presbyters baptised provisionally, with their rites being 'confirmed' by the Bishop on his next visit. From these origins evolved the idea that babies should be baptised as soon as possible, spoken for by parents and Godparents, only later to confirm and own the vows made on their behalf when old and sentient enough to do so. Connected to this was the fear of dying unbaptised and the eternal consequences thereof. Nowadays there are various practices in various Churches, but at the heart of all of them is a celebration and affirmation of a point of arrival on the Christian journey; the confession of faith by the candidate; the invocation and reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit; and a sense that this is a unique event in one's life.

The public and the personal

Confirmation is an occasion on which someone's private, interior spirituality is expressed in public. It is an occasional event for which the congregation gathers, led by a senior leader, cleric or Bishop, and carries with it notes of celebration and affirmation of a personal calling from God, to be sealed by the Holy Spirit, giving meaning and impetus for the remainder of life and hope for resurrection life beyond. The day the Bishop comes to confirm in a parish on a festival day, or when candidates go to the Cathedral to be with many others from all over the Diocese, is a special occasion. The latter kind of event may well be at Easter emphasising the ancient tradition of Lent being a time of penitential preparation for Christian initiation. Accordingly, there will be music, perhaps Holy Communion, and of course hymns to set and reflect the personal and public nature of the occasion.

Confirming and affirming opportunities

The service is not only attended by those affirming their faith: their families, sponsors, friends, acquaintances and work colleagues may turn up too. In our multi-cultural, interfaith, 'spiritual' age, the thoughts and attitudes of some of the congregation are not to be taken for granted. Christian liturgy is strange indeed to some, and yet this 'work of the people' (*laos ergon*) can have explanatory and evangelistic purposes, and a Confirmation service affords opportunities that a wedding or funeral does not. Members of the congregation are more likely to be receptive to what is going on, whether because they themselves have been through it, or because they have not. The sermon is of course important, but at confirmation-type services the old adage *lex orandi, lex credendi*

(‘what they pray, they believe’) holds true. Such services therefore need to be planned and prayed for with great care and devotion.

The role of the hymnody

Hymns at a Confirmation, rather as at an Ordination, have a special role. As at any service of word and / or sacrament, they can reflect upon, resonate with or otherwise take their cue from the biblical readings chosen. If the service is eucharistic the hymns may well fit into the usual points in the liturgy (processional, gradual, offertory, post-communion), while there may be a need for a hymn, chant or song immediately before the central act of commitment or dedication. Dave Evans’ ‘Be still, for the presence of the Lord’ (BE STILL) is a classic choice to inculcate and create a sense of awe at the imminent work of the Holy Spirit in someone’s life. It is well known, or easily learnt amidst a congregation where many do know it. There may also be some kind of movement towards the font or baptismal pool, in which case similarly specific material may be used. In this is a golden opportunity often lacking at weddings and funerals: the hymnody does not need to appeal to the lowest common denominator, for there will be enough people present to ‘carry’ hymns that visitors may not know, and if well led, even strangers may become musical pilgrims as they catch the tune and join in, singing words which may yet burrow into their souls or swim around their minds after they have gone home.

What choice do we have?

Given how significant confirmation, adult baptism or reception into membership is in a Christian’s faith journey, there are remarkably few good hymns with which to mark the occasion. *The New English Hymnal* offers only one hymn (‘My God, accept my heart this day’), yet offers 12 suggestions from its more general provision. *Common Praise* has two hymns in its Baptism and Confirmation section which might suit, while its successor, the latest *Ancient and Modern*, has a ‘Christian Initiation’ section providing up to 8 potential choices. *Singing the Faith* from the Methodist tradition has a ‘Covenant, Commitment and Dedication’ section of 22 hymns, all of which are appropriate, but none specific to the task in hand. *Church Hymnary* 4 has a section with 8 hymns, ‘St Patrick’s Breastplate’ and ‘Seek ye first’ among them. Kevin Mayhew’s *Anglican Hymns Old and New*, lacking any sections at all, offers a list of 77 possibilities, thereby encouraging hymn-choosers to pick their favourites. A Confirmation can provide an excuse for a Big Sing, but that would be a missed opportunity.

What might we sing?

As with many other occasional offices and special occasions, the brief sections in hymn books are not extensive nor comprehensive, and both classic and inspired choices come from elsewhere in the hymn book. Although written by Daniel Schutte for a diaconal ordination, ‘I, the Lord of sea and sky (Here I am, Lord)’ is eminently suitable, as are ‘Be thou my vision’, ‘O Jesus, I have promised’ and ‘Amazing grace’. From the Pentecost section one might remember ‘O thou who camest from above’ and ‘Come down, O Love Divine’, while ‘Firmly I believe and truly’ or ‘Will you come and follow me’ (John Bell) can find place too. ‘Holy Spirit, come confirm us’ by Brian Foley is a bit obvious, and a good choice too! ‘Take my life, and let it be’ and ‘My God, accept my heart this day’ are similarly reliable options. More unusual choices might include ‘For me to live is Christ’ by Peter Tongeman or Shirley Erena Murray’s ‘Here is the place, now is the time’. Bernadette Farrell’s ‘Word of God, renew your people’ and Timothy Dudley-Smith’s ‘We turn to Christ anew’ are worthy of attention, as is his ‘Freed in Christ from death and sin’. Finally, one may resort to the ever popular ‘One more step along the world I go’, yet while noticing the complete absence of any reference to God therein. That could well amount to another of those missed opportunities to preach, teach and reach out through the hymns we sing.

Conclusion

The selecting of hymns for a confirmation is hugely important because it could help change someone’s life. As others affirm their commitment to a continuing walk with Christ, expressed and manifested in heartfelt faith, guests and friends may catch a glimpse of what is being affirmed. Thus the hymns have a significant role to play in the big picture of celebration, which also serves as an invitation to join in with what God is doing in freshly renewed lives.

Gordon Giles – May 2016 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

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