

10.15 am HC
Is 65:1-9; Gal 3:23-end;
Luke 8: 26-39

23 June 2019

Clothed with Christ

The police cadet was sitting her exams to become a constable. One question proved a challenge. It described a situation of a potential riot, developing outside a high building, visible to the cadet through an upstairs window. The question ended, 'What would you do?'

After several moments of thought and pen-chewing she wrote a single sentence: 'Locate back door, remove uniform, mingle with crowd.'... she may not have passed the exam...

You may wear, or have worn, a uniform, both for practical reasons and to identify you as a member of an organisation, school, trade or profession. And as for sport- the team strip is vital and brings you together. Last weekend I was sorting out old family photos and came across one of Nick's brother in a vivid purple hockey strip, proudly holding a trophy won by his team, and next to it, a shot of line of 12 identical purple shirts hanging out to dry – I gave them the title the grime and the glory!

What we wear says so much about who we are...

In today's epistle from Galatians we have the wonderful verse

*As many of you as were baptised into Christ have **clothed yourselves with Christ** – there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

When we are baptised as Christians, welcomed into God's family through Jesus' saving power, we 'put on' Christ.

When I was confirmed it was the custom for girls to wear white dresses, as an outward sign of the Holy Spirit's work within us. I was deeply self-conscious, but the point was made... I was signing up as a Christian, confirming for myself the promises made at my christening, 'putting on Christ.'

When we clothe ourselves with Christ, we let others know we are Christians. And we're not wearing a discreet brooch or a tie which we can take off when we feel like it, as Rory Stewart did this week. We want others to see Christ in us, as we allow his love and grace to permeate our lives.

At Pentecost we sang 'Come down O love divine'- a beautiful prayer which uses the image of clothing.

Let holy charity Mine outward vesture be

And lowliness become mine inner clothing

To be clothed with Christ is to be made whole- the meaning, incidentally, of the word 'salvation'.

Through the holy Spirit's work in our lives, Christ brings integrity to who we are on the outside and inside of our lives.

We find our truest identity, the very essence and meaning of who we are, in Christ. That is both a promise and the work of a lifetime, as we become the person God created us, and calls us, to be.

The Bible often refers to clothing. For example-

When Samuel was a boy, taken to the temple to serve the Lord and the priest Eli, his mother Hannah would take him a new, hand sewn robe each year. In this we have the sense of loving care as we grow up- grow to maturity in Christ, as his disciples. When we are clothed with Christ, we can be sure our garments are made to measure for us, with room for growth as we mature in our faith.

Secondly, remember the end of the story of the prodigal son, who comes home, a tired, tattered, humbled and repentant young man. His father, overjoyed at his return, orders that he be given a brand new robe. The clothing is the outer sign of unconditional love and total restoration into the family- a picture of God's love for us, in fact.

Likewise, in today's gospel, we find more evidence of what it means to be clothed with Christ.

The Gerasene demoniac- I think of the illustration in my school Bible, showing a wild man with unkempt hair and beard, dressed in rags, surrounded by filthy pigs. He was given rags to preserve his modesty but the Bible says he was naked. Naked, living among the graves and in chains. It's a frightening picture of what we might now term severe mental illness, what the Victorians would have called lunacy, worthy of an asylum and a straitjacket. And in spiritual terms he is possessed by 'many demons' – 'legion', a Roman regiment of them. The reality of the battle with evil, and its effect on individuals, is all too vivid here. Competing powers have overtaken this man so he is out of his mind,

isolated, gripped by fear and violence. So too, tragically, people today, often through addictions which hold them captive and ruin lives.

Luke describes the man's encounter with Jesus, the moment he steps out of the boat. The location, by the way, is debatable, but we do know Jesus was in Gentile territory, in the region of the Decapolis or Ten Towns, these cities being famed as centres of Greco-Roman culture: think of Florence or Venice, Rome itself.

It makes it all the more shocking then that Jesus is accosted by a deeply uncivilised – or perhaps *decivilized* man.

Jesus commands the demons to leave him. It is clear that they recognise Jesus' power and submit to him, asking to be sent into the herd of pigs, which causes quite a stir locally.

But the end of the story, on which I want to focus today, describes the man once he is set free from the demon possession. Luke tells us 3 things:

He is with Jesus, sitting at his feet as a disciple, ready to learn from Jesus.

He is clothed – no longer naked, ashamed, unprotected. The outer clothing indicates the healing and restoration that have taken place.

And thirdly Luke says he is in his right mind.

This healing is total: spirit, mind and body.

Ushered away re-crossing the lake, Jesus allows the man to travel with him. We can only guess at the conversation in the boat. Not surprisingly the man wants to stay with Jesus, rather than facing notoriety and recriminations back home, but Jesus sends him back. And he gives him a purpose, this man who is newly clothed with Christ, is to tell everyone what God has done for him, in his family, his neighbourhood, his home town.

So what about us?

You may not be at all bothered what you wear, but most of us are. We live in a fashion-conscious age, and those fortunate enough to be able to choose what they wear can spend disproportionate amounts of time and money developing our image, looking good, fitting in to the local culture.

So as we read this remarkably account today, let us hear Jesus speaking to us.

He asks us to be known, clearly and evidently, as Christians, by our outer demeanour and our inner peace. By the integrity of our lives which honour him.

And he invites us daily to put on the clothing he gives us, made to measure, fitting perfectly, but with room for growth.

The beautiful and priceless clothing which identifies us as his children, forgiven, loved and free.

Lets wear it with joy, to his praise and glory. Amen.