

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, October 5, 2008
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“Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?” (From the gospel, Matthew 22:1f.)

The gospel is a parable about judgment. It is aimed primarily at the generation in Israel that rejected the Son of God. The burning of the city is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. However, the parable also implies a judgment for the church, those brought in from the highways.

The king came in to survey the guests. This seems to correspond with what we say in the Creed, “He shall come again with glory to judge.” As the king came in, he found a man “who had not on a wedding garment” and promptly had him thrown into “outer darkness.”

This not so nattily attired man represents our greatest fear with regard to the Christian life and the Day of Judgment. We follow Christ all of our lives, but then are bounced into hell on the last day because of some minor flaw in our faith.

However, the clothes represent something more than a minor flaw. The man wasn’t sentenced to eternity in outer darkness because he missed church a couple of times. The improper dress indicates a lack of some essential thing.

We can get a good idea of what that thing is by looking at the way the Bible uses the image of clothing to represent something more than clothing. For example, Psalm 132 says, “Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness.” And the prophet Isaiah says,

My soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:10).

In the New Testament, our change into the image of Christ is described as change of clothes. Last week, our epistle from Ephesians exhorted us to,

Put off...the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness (4:22).

The New Testament tells us to put off anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication and lying. And it tells us to put on, as a garment, mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; forbearance and forgiveness. And Colossians says, “Above all these things put on love (the virtue of charity) which is the bond of perfection.” (Colossians 3:8-14).

We are called to put off our sins the way we take off clothes. And we are called to put on the gifts of God the way we put on new clothes. This was highlighted in the early church in baptism. Those being baptized took off their clothes before they entered the water and put on new clothes as they emerged as new Christians.

This transformation points forward to Revelation 19:8, which says of the church, the bride of Christ: “To her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.”

Our ill clad man was lacking in this essential transformation. He was in the church. He may have liked the idea of worship or morality. He may have thought that a little religion was a good thing. But he was not about the business of putting off the old man and putting on Christ (Galatians 3:27).

The Bible teaches us that among the visible membership of the church are some who will not ultimately be saved. God lets the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest (Matthew 13:30). God takes up both good and bad fish in the net, but will separate them at the end (13:47-49).

Judgment is not a popular theme, but it is a biblical theme. If we look at the biblical model, Jesus preached salvation to those outside of God’s people, but gave warning of judgment to those who were inside. Thus, the parable is aimed, not at all the unbelievers out there, but at us. This one guy who did not make it is designed to make us think about how we are living.

The epistle today (Ephesians 5:15f.) exhorts us, “See, then, that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” The days are evil because time causes us to drift away from God, unless we make a conscious effort to use time for good.

Many Christians have come to realize that, while the initial experience of coming to faith in Christ is important, it is equally important to adopt faithful habits of life that will sustain our faith over time. To be faithful, we must consciously redeem the time because the days are evil.

Being a Christian is not just about showing up for church on Sunday most of the time. It is about living life “in Christ.” We talk about living by a “rule of life.” A rule of life is a pattern of prayer and spiritual discipline that we commit to the way an athlete commits to training. A rule or pattern of behavior is necessary because we are formed by what we habitually do.

Our rule for spiritual discipline should include a regular pattern of Bible reading, for it is primarily through God’s word that we discover what is amiss within us and are led to confession and change. Our rule should include habits of silence, times when we disconnect with the hurriedness and noise of the world and commune with God in the beauty of holiness.

Our Anglican framework for a rule of life is three-fold. The Sunday Eucharist, the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer, and some regular practice of conversational prayer. Our goal is for every member of our church to live by this rule in some way. Our goal is not just to be in church, but to live life “in Christ.”

All of the New Testament clothing imagery speaks of ongoing action. We are to put off sin and put on Christ continually, as those who are waiting for the King to come, as those who want to be appropriately dressed for the coming feast of our salvation.