

TRINITY 18 2020 (Year A) – Matthew 22: 1-14; Philippians 4: 1-9 – ‘Clothed in Christ’

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Curate

So have you ever turned up somewhere under-dressed, over-dressed, or even totally wrongly dressed....?

I am reminded of the episode from ‘Only Fools and Horses’ where Del boy and Rodney are invited to a fancy dress party for landlord Harry Malcolm, an occasion for which Del boy purchases a Batman and Robin outfit for them – however, on the evening of the party they arrive, bursting through the door and singing the *Batman theme*, only to find that everyone else is dressed in black mourning clothes and looking very sombre – unfortunately Harry has actually died the day before and so the party has become a wake instead!

Now other than just wanting to provide a vivid image of someone being dressed in inappropriate clothing, there is no other similarity between this example from Only Fools and Horses and the parable that Jesus tells in Matthew’s gospel. Or the second part of the parable anyway – because this is in fact a parable of 2 halves! (*Or the amalgamation of 2 parables as is commonly thought*).

The parable’s main theme centres on a great wedding feast being held by a king for his son, (the King of course representing God, and Jesus His son.) The first half of the parable concentrates on those who are invited to this feast, whilst the second half focusses on the clothing required in order to be able to remain and enjoy the feast.

The banquet itself represents the kingdom of heaven, to which the people to whom Jesus is talking at the time, the scribes and pharisees, will have considered themselves invited. However, as we see in the imagery Jesus uses, when the king sends out his messengers with the invitation that the banquet is all ready to receive its guests, the scribes and pharisees are not ready! Whether this is because they aren’t listening, or taking proper notice, or are just too busy and distracted by other things in their lives, the result is that the king decides to extend his invitation and throw open the wedding party to everyone.

Now for the scribes and pharisees who knew Jesus was directing this message at them, this would not have been what they wanted or expected to hear. However, for everybody else – this was and is very good news. And indeed is the first message of this parable – that God’s love is for all - whether we think we, or anyone else, deserves it, God’s invitation to enjoy the kingdom of heaven is for everybody..... All-inclusive... non-discriminatory!

As I have said before, when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, this is not something in the future, beyond our lives here on earth. Although we *can* look forward to a perfect place with God in heaven when we die, the kingdom of heaven is something to be enjoyed here and now. Because God’s whole desire is that all of His creation can enjoy knowing Him and being in a loving relationship with Him, and each other, *right now*..... a relationship which brings joy to God and to us ... hence Jesus’s comparison to the kingdom of heaven as a joyous wedding feast.

However, we then come to the second part of the parable..... to the person who has been invited but is then spotted by the king to be wearing the wrong clothes for the occasion.....

And before we look more closely at what can be the uncomfortable part of this parable, I would firstly just like to highlight the way the king addresses this person. Because even though He has already noticed that this man is not wearing the right clothes, he still addresses him as ‘Friend’

In the dictionary ‘friend’ is described as someone who is well known to another and regarded with affection and loyalty.....and in Proverbs we are told that “a friend loves at all times” (*Prov 17:17*) Whatever we’ve done, this is how God constantly looks at us – with the eyes of love and friendship.....

But.....as we see, the man is not wearing a wedding robe; he is not dressed in a way that befits such a banquet..... Because there is a way to dress for this feast, a need to be wearing clothes that identify and reflect the bridegroom Himself.

And in an odd sort of way I guess I can return to my original example from Only Fools and Horses in that, in the light of this parable, Del boy and Rodney were wearing the more suitable clothes. Because to know Jesus is like being clothed in a super-power – just not the worldly perception of power For to be clothed in the garments of Christ is to wear all the values of the Kingdom of God that He stands for – compassion, kindness, joy, patience, humility, forgiveness, generosity...and most importantly, MERCY and GRACE..... Because Christ's body wore the stripes from beatings, the blood from thorns, and the puncture marks of nails..... and yet, as He faced death on the cross, He said: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing....." (*Luke 23:24*)

Earlier this week my sister-in-law sent me a reading. It tells of a soldier who made it his practice to end each day with Bible reading and prayer. As the other soldiers gathered in the barracks and retired for the night, this soldier would kneel by his bunk. Some of the soldiers who saw this began to mock him. And then one night the abuse went beyond words, and as he bowed in prayer one soldier threw his boots at him and hit him in the face. The others jeered, looking for a fight, but there was no retaliation. Instead, the next morning when the boot-thrower woke up there at the foot of his bed were his boots – polished and returned. I wonder what being clothed in the mercy and grace of Christ looks like in our lives?

These times we are living through at the moment, more than ever need us to be reacting in the ways of Christ..... as the economy is effected and people are losing their jobs, as tensions and anxieties and fears escalate, and many are suffering; mercy and grace, generosity and compassion, are essential items of clothing we need to be wearing

One final note, that I cannot leave without mentioning, is the final verse of today's reading. Because I have always found it hard to believe that the loving God who goes before me and takes care of me every day could possibly throw anyone "into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth". But in one of those illuminating moments, I suddenly realised that actually this must be how it would feel to not be in God's presence..... especially if we had been able to glimpse and taste the pure joy of it.....

But separation from God is not what He wants for us.....

Every day God continues to send out His messengers with His life-changing invitation to join Him in His kingdom..... it is an invitation for everybody, to a banquet that begins here and now.....May God in His great mercy and grace continue to help us dress in such a way that reveal us as guests at His banquet.....

AMEN