

Clothing

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Colossians 3:12-17

One of the many joys this Christmas has been the number of nativity stories that have been told within the Church. Our own Sunday Club a few Sundays ago, with the wise-cracking angels full of stories and news. And also the South Morningside Primary School Primary 1 nativity. On one day we had over 600 children in church, which is why we need to take the seat out so that they can all fit in.

All the Primary 1s took part. Mary and Joseph, as you would expect. An innkeeper. Shepherds and sheep. Wise men and their camels. A donkey. A shining star. Angels and what seemed like hundreds of doves. And one random fox. Neither the fox, nor I, knew what his part was to be in the Nativity Play, but there he was, fortunately at a reasonable distance from the doves.

I marvelled, as I always do, at the ingenuity and determination and imagination of the costumes. The doves, a flurry of white feathers. The star – gold spandex and sparkling. The camel, all in beige and with a moveable hump. The sheep in a variety of white woolly dressing gowns and sweaters. The wise men in metallic crowns and gorgeous apparel from grandmother's curtain cut-offs from the 1970s. Joseph in the inevitable brown dressing gown and tea-towel. Mary in blue – the colour of healing, the colour of heaven. And the random fox in a browny-orange onesie and a beautiful mask. Everyone pulled out all the stops to make sure that the nativity play was well dressed. All that clothing.

When we think of the original nativity in and around Bethlehem, I wonder how much of it was quite so exotic. We in the C21st see it as so much dressing up in outlandish outfits. They would have seen it as their ordinary, everyday clothing.

Clothing of different varieties and for different reasons plays a part in the stories of the Bible. It could be the fig-leaf aprons Adam and Eve made to hide their nakedness in the Garden of Eden in the poetry of the Creation stories. Or Joseph and his amazing technicolour dream coat. Or Solomon in all his glory not arrayed like one of the lilies of the field. Or Lydia, the New Testament dyer of purple. Or John the Baptist in his rough animal skins. Or the priests in the temple of Jerusalem in all their liturgical get-up. Or the child of Hannah, Samuel, who grew into one of Israel's greatest prophets, overseeing Israel's transition from a tribal confederacy into a unified kingdom under Saul, then David. Here, in our Old Testament reading, already having been dedicated by his parents to work in the holy place at Shiloh, being given by his mother a 'linen ephod', an apronlike garment that is a priestly vestment, worn by priests as they burned incense at God's altar and made sacrifices. Hannah's gift was nothing extravagant, but one can imagine the love she poured into each stitch as she made the robe, thinking of her son Samuel and whispering prayers of gratitude to God for the gift of Samuel's life. Samuel's dual identity, literally clothed and wearing the garment of a priest and the robe of his mother.

And if you thought you recognized something at the end of the Old Testament reading when you heard, "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men"ⁱ, then you'd be right. In his gospel Luke not only draws on Hannah's song when he writes Mary's song, the Magnificat, but also echoes the Samuel story in telling of Jesus' growing up, "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon Him."ⁱⁱ Jesus too came to speak about a unifying Kingdom – the Kingdom of God.

I wonder also if there was also something in Luke's description of the birth of Jesus that also had a connection to the Samuel story. Mary gave birth to her first-born son, "and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger."ⁱⁱⁱ Swaddling cloths described in the Bible consisted

of a cloth tied together by bandage-like strips of linen. After an infant was born, the umbilical cord was cut and tied, and then the baby was washed, rubbed with salt and oil, and wrapped with strips of cloth. These strips kept the newborn child warm and were thought to ensure that the child's limbs would grow straight.

Ephods. Cloths. Clothing.

Not just something literal, but metaphorical. That is what Paul is driving at when he writes that we should, 'Put on', or 'clothe' ourselves with 'compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience...(forgiveness)...And above all these put on, (clothe yourselves), which binds (swaddles) everything together in perfect harmony."

Faith is like a kind of garment that we can choose to put on, or to take off. Elsewhere Paul writes that we should our Christian living is like a kind of armour of God that will not only protect but guide us.^{iv} But in his letter to the Colossians the metaphor is more homely, and more every-day, but just as important. We have to put on the clothing of faith, not simply so that it can be seen from the outside, but that it should be part of our very being and come to us as naturally as breathing. If your inward faith has no outward working, what is the point of it? Feeling all holy and religious on the inside needs to be matched by actions and words on the outside. Christian faith is not a private recreation, it is a public statement of who we are and what we believe, and why we believe, and even how we believe.

Looking out from the manse windows on Christmas afternoon, and Boxing Day, all the people of Morningside were out parading in their finery, gifts over the Christmas season. The hats and gloves and coats. In fact it was so warm some simply wore sweaters. And no doubt that great standby for the difficult-to-buy-for-man – socks. I got six pairs of socks this year!

But no matter how fine these garments are, they come nowhere near the clothing of 'compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience...(forgiveness)...And above all these put on, (clothe yourselves), with love, which binds (swaddles) everything together in perfect harmony." Are you clothed with a compassion for others that people can see and feel? Are you clothed with kindness that is warm and generous towards friends, family and strangers? In your outfit of living will we find lowliness and meekness – that humility of spirit that thinks about the needs of others first? In your wardrobe is the patience and forgiveness? The heart and soul that puts up with much because it is sometimes better to do this in the long run and forgives because a held grudge and a spirit of unforgiveness rips at the fabric of families and friends and the things that should bind us together. What about any hard thoughts, or narrowed eyes, or over-hasty tongues over these last few days? That display the raggedness of our faith apparel, and not the swaddling of love that binds things together.

When Paul contrasts between what is old and what is new, what is dead and what is alive, what is on earth and what is in heaven, it seems likely that he refers to the early Christian adult baptismal practice where the candidate takes off the old clothes before entering the baptismal waters, before emerging and clothed in something new. Becoming a Christian as an adult or growing into Christian faith as an infant in the family of faith, can be a sudden or gradual transformation. But a transformation, nonetheless. Paul is not interested in the way we dress when we come to Church; he is concerned with the way we clothe our souls. How do we relate to others, and indeed, to God?

Because of our Christian faith, however strong or weak we may feel that is, the well-dressed congregation in the eyes of God will be compassionate and kind; humble and meek and patient. These are relational virtues – they mark how we think and behave toward one another in the

community, not just in Church. This clothing Paul speaks of is not an 'outside' metaphor; it is an inside one, because it shows we have taken to heart what it means to be a Christian person in how we think, speak and act. We don't always get it right. The fabric sometimes gets torn or dirty, but we can mend it, and clean it, and wear it again in hopefulness.

Clothing, little Samuel and his linen ephod. Little Jesus and His swaddling cloths. And us today, with our lives as best we are able clothed in compassion and kindness; humility and patience. And love. When you go about your daily business, don't forget to clothe yourself with love. And be thankful.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *1 Samuel 2:26*

ⁱⁱ *Luke 2:40*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid 2:7*

^{iv} *1 Thessalonians 5:8-9*