

Clothed

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

Have you ever wondered about swaddling clothes? Having read the passage from Luke, chapter 2, several times in the last couple of weeks, it suddenly struck me that I didn't quite know what they were or what they were for. The obvious use was to protect the child, the cloths were wrapped around to replicate the child still in the womb and restricting movement.

A rabbi scholar suggests another meaning. The shepherds out in the fields, who heard the song of the angels, were likely to be 'Levitical shepherds', shepherds whose job was to raise lambs for the Temple sacrifices. The lambs they raised were meant to be spotless and without blemish, so the shepherds would wrap up the lambs in swaddling clothes to protect them, an important connection point with the infant Jesus. A baby born in the same place as the Passover lambs were born; also wrapped in swaddling clothes. The Lamb of God, the Messiah, coming to take away the sins of the world. A child wrapped in clothes, in much the same way as a body would be prepared for its tomb, another symbol also underlined by the gifts of the Magi, whose gift of myrrh was also a funeral ointment.

From birth, Jesus was clothed for death, and for what lay beyond.

Clothing plays a significant part in the Bible. From the poetic description of the Creation with Adam and Eve sowing their fig-leaf aprons, to Joseph and his amazing technicolour dream coat, to the wonderful garments worn by King Solomon, to the lilies of the field, better arrayed than Solomon, to Lydia, a maker of dyes, to the clothing stripped from Jesus and gambled for at Calvary, to the full armour of God Paul writes about in his letter to the Ephesians.

Clothing is used not only for its normal purposes, but to say something. It has a literal function and a metaphorical meaning. Like the swaddling cloths in which Jesus was wrapped by Mary and Joseph after His birth.

Polonius may tell his son Laertes in *Hamlet* that 'apparel oft proclaims the man', but when Paul writes in Colossians to put on faith like a form of clothing, what is it supposed to mean?

In baptism in the early Christian Church, which was often for adults until families embraced faith, those about to be baptised would take off their old clothing before entering into the baptismal waters (often a river), then emerging and being clothed with something new. In our time there is a slight echo in this old tradition when we might often put on our 'Sunday best' to come to Church. It was a tradition not about showing off, but of showing that only our best was good enough for God.

What should a Christian wear? Paul writes, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved..."

Compassion.

Kindness.

Lowliness.

Meekness.

Patience.

Forgiveness.

Love.

Peacefulness.

Thankfulness.

That's quite a wardrobe for the well-dressed congregation. These virtues mark how we think and act toward one another; they mark how we think and behave toward the community in which we live. They are relational virtues.

These virtues provide the framework and the motivation for settling disputes amongst believers and non-believers. We are reminded that we should forgive as we are forgiven, a clear echo of the Lord's Prayer.

On the last Sunday of the old year, which will have been the usual mixture of delight and disaster, triumph and defeat, memorable and forgettable, it is time to sort out that wardrobe of ours, for we will need it to be serviceable in the coming New Year. Maybe the clothes Paul talks about will be new to you and will be a delight. Maybe they are familiar but have been buried

deep in your cupboard of faith, or rolled up into a ball at the back of the drawer of life. But they are there, and it's time to dig them out, clean them, mend them, wear them, and live them.

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...”

Compassion. How does that look on you?

Kindness. How does that look on you?

Lowliness. How does that look on you?

Meekness. How does that look on you?

Patience. How does that look on you?

Forgiveness. How does that look on you?

Love. How does that look on you?

Peacefulness. How does that look on you?

But whatever you do, Paul urges, be thankful. Thankfulness. How does that look on you?

I read about a Baptist Church in Decatur, which is a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. It is called The Thankful Baptist Church. Talk about giving yourself a name that would be a constant reminder to be something deeply Christian. I googled them, and found that there were several 'Thankful' Churches in Georgia, and in other parts of the United States.

Not named after a saint, or a geographical area of a city, but after a Christian virtue.

You're probably way ahead of me, but imagine, just imagine, we had decided not to name the united congregation building we are sitting in today Morningside, but instead had chosen to call ourselves the Thankful Parish Church. I wouldn't have turned up my nose at the Compassionate Parish Church, or the Kind Parish Church. Might have struggled with the Lowly Parish Church or the Meek Parish Church but we'd have got there. What might you have felt about the Patient Parish Church, or the Forgiving Parish Church, or the Peaceful Parish Church, or the Loving Parish Church?

But above all else, the Thankful Parish Church.

Ridiculous? Fanciful? Unrealistic? Unachievable? Unsustainable? Well, maybe. We know what a struggle it is to live up to any of those in our own lives, but a whole congregation?

Nevertheless. As we stand on the brink of a New Year, with 2018 fast disappearing behind us and 2019 rising before us, with many challenges, and many opportunities, we could do worse than taking a leaf out of Paul's letter to those Colossian Christians 2000 years ago. If we are to be a well-dressed Christian congregation, putting on the clothes of our practised belief and facing a New Year, reach into the wardrobe of faith. And above all else, whatever you do in word or deed, put on thankfulness.

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

Amen