

From this week's Epistle, from the Letter of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians:

See then that ye walk circumspectly, redeeming the time, ... submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God. Ephesians 5:15. 21

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So, was Jesus just having a really, really, really bad day? I mean, had Peter or Andrew or one of the other disciples burnt the toast at breakfast again? Had a donkey stepped on his toes on the way out of Jerusalem? Was he just tired of all the quibbling between James and John at the others about who would get the best seats in his kingdom? Because if he's not having a really, really, really bad day, how do we reconcile the Jesus who told us lovely parable about lost sheep being found and lost sons being forgiven with the Jesus who told the parable found in this week's Gospel: an incredibly dark parable about wedding guests who kill servants sent to invite them to a feast; and a deeply angry and offended king who sends his armies to kill that ungrateful lot and burn down their cities in revenge; who then opens up the feast to lots of poor folks; but who then has a last-minute guest assaulted and tied up and tossed out into the darkness, to weep and gnash his teeth, just because he missed the memo about the dress code? I mean, is this the kind of message that warms your heart; does it encourage your soul? Or is this the kind of message that's more likely to terrify you? Have a look at yourself. I mean, do your clothes meet the dress code? Are you dressed appropriately for the feast that we're about to enjoy? Or do I have to ask a few of the stronger types here to pick you up and toss you out the door?

In general, dress codes have largely disappeared. We no longer expect people to wear certain things to get into certain events. And with the frequency of people working from home and meetings being held on Zoom, business dress these days consists of sleep pants or sweatpants, with a nice shirt and sweater. So the idea that someone would be treated so harshly just because he's not wearing the right thing has to feel deeply unfair to us.

But what if this man's great sin isn't the fact that he's not wearing the right clothes but the fact that he willfully chose not to put the right clothes on? What if, as some think, the king has already passed out the clothes for the party, as part of this last-minute invitation? And what if the anger of this king arises not from the fact that this man lacked the means to wear what was expected but from a refusal to wear the wedding garment that he'd been given?¹ Does that change what we think about this story? And does it change what this story is saying about us?

All through the weeks of the second half of the Season of Trinity we've been challenged to think about how we walk; and to try to get our walk right; in other words, to think in very tangible ways of what it means to follow Christ and to walk with him. On Trinity 13, for example, our Epistle reading focussed on what it means to "walk in the Spirit;" and our Gospel reading invited us to imitate the walk of the Good Samaritan. On Trinity 14, we were again challenged to "walk in the Spirit;" and our

¹ Just as Pharaoh gave new clothes to Joseph's brothers before their journey back to Canaan (Genesis 45:22); and Ahasuerus clothed Mordecai in royal robes to honour him for saving the king's life (Esther 6:8-11); and God speaks of clothing his bride with rich embroidered cloth and jewels; or the clothing of the righteous in white robes in Revelation 7:9ff.

Gospel spoke of the walk of the one grateful leper who turned back to give thanks to Christ. On Trinity 17, our Epistle called us to “walk worthy of our vocation;” and the Gospel taught us how to walk humbly. On Trinity 19, we were directed not to walk “as other Gentiles walk;” and in the Gospel Jesus told a paralysed man that he should “arise and walk.” And this week, once again, what do we hear in the Epistle? “*See then that ye walk circumspectly.*” That is, see that we walk with care and attention to how we live.

As you may have noticed, in this week’s Gospel there are, in effect, two refusals. Some refuse the invitation outright. They’re too busy, too pre-occupied, or too self-occupied. So the king invites others. In fact, it sounds as if he invites just about everyone; even those who wouldn’t normally have had the chance to attend such an event. Which, of course, is Good News. The Good news is God’s gracious invitation to all: to share in the joy of his Son Jesus Christ. But, as we discover, it’s also an invitation to change; and be changed. We are to be transformed. We are to be changed into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That’s our only job. We don’t have to go out and buy some fancy wedding garment. The host of the banquet gives that to us freely. And all we have to do is put it on; to allow the Holy Spirit to renew us in the image and likeness of our Creator.

That’s the point of this week’s Gospel that we have to hear loudly and clearly. Everyone is invited to the banquet; but if we want to stay; if we truly want to enjoy all the benefits of that gracious invitation, we have to be changed. But even that is Good News, because by Grace God has the power to change our hearts; to turn us away from the destructive power of selfish love to the transforming liberating love and heals our hearts. That’s what Jesus Christ does for us. He breaks the chain of violence and revenge. He takes the faults and failings of our lives, the sins that stain our hands and hearts, and he makes us clean. He clothes us in the clothes that we cannot afford to buy ourselves; and all we have to do is put them on.² And that, perhaps, is what the poor man in this week’s Gospel is really guilty of: the refusal to accept the free gift that the king had given him.

So, as the Season of Trinity comes to a close; as we draw near to end of another Church Year; as we struggle to find hope in a world of incredible confusion and disorder; violence and division, we are invited to a feast; a wedding feast, in fact.³ We are invited to come in and sit down and enjoy the great goodness of the host. With living in fear that we will be abandoned or forgotten. Knowing that Christ has clothed us with his Grace. Knowing that he has reserved our space at the table. And all we have to do is respond to this Grace with love; allowing him to transform our small, petty, loves into the great love that can heal the world.

² See also:

Romans 13:12: the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; *Colossians 3:12-14:* Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Ephesians 6:11: Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

³ *Revelation 21:1-4:* Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."