

I want to talk this morning about a contrast in the two readings that intrigued me as I looked at them this week. It's a contrast between the man in the gospel story who wears no clothes and then Paul's encouragement to clothe yourselves with Christ. So it's a clothes, no clothes contrast that has caught my attention. And my reflections on the theme of clothing and nakedness... Actually, when I started to look at it, draw on a rich theme in the Bible. It's surprising to see how much the Bible has to say on the subject of clothing. Let me begin with the story in the gospel about the man who calls himself Legion. We're told when we first meet him, that he hadn't worn clothes for a long time. A detail which is indicative of the pitiful state, which he'd fallen into. And of course at the end of the story, when Jesus has healed him, then when the people come to see him again, they find him fully clothed and in his right mind.

We're born naked, but uniquely in the animal kingdom, we spend nearly all of our time wearing clothes. In fact, most of us would spend as much time as possible wearing clothes. Nakedness is a sign of poverty or poor mental health. To be naked is to be vulnerable. Which is why so many people have dreams in which they appear naked. It's a form of being completely exposed that comes out in our subconscious as we dream. An older person in the parish told me recently that this had happened to them. They'd had a dream and in this dream, they were walking down Main treet naked. And they heard two men having a conversation. And one of them said to the other, "What's that woman wearing?" To which the other person replied, "Well, I don't know, but whatever it is, it needs ironing."

It's because of the vulnerability of nakedness that it's an image used in the Christian tradition to describe how we are to come before God. If we're to enjoy the kind of relationship with God, which is our inheritance as Christians, then there can be no pretense before God. As the hymn writer says, we come to God "just as I am." We're to come before God with a kind of vulnerability that comes with nakedness. Paul says, "Do not lie to one another seeing that you have stripped off the old self." As another hymn writer says, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling, naked come to the

for dress." There was a famous 19th century preacher called Billy Bray, who was preaching on this theme. He was invited to the church to preach and to illustrate the point stripped off all his clothes in the pulpit.

I'm not sure whether he was ever invited back to preach at that church. Somehow I think he probably wasn't. We all work hard at cultivating an image that we present to the world. We're keen to shape the way that the world sees us. And the clothes that we wear are a big part of that image or identity. I remember as a teenager going to extraordinary lengths to get a friend who was an airline hostess, to bring me back some red converse basketball shoes, because I was convinced that wearing those shoes would make me look cool. Little did I know how much more was required to make me look cool. But anyway, that what was motivating this great converse escapade.

We all use clothes and other things to build layers around ourselves, to protect us and to construct an image and an identity. I had a rector friend once called Don. And let me say that the first story I told you, wasn't entirely true, but this one is. Don was in hospital and he happened to be on a ward that had several parishioners and people that he knew on it. And he was in the shower one day and he slipped and he had to be rushed out of the shower, back to his bed. He was put in a wheelchair with nothing on. And to protect his modesty, the nurse gave him a towel, not a very big towel as he was wheeled back through the ward. And Don didn't do what you might have thought he did with the towel. He actually put it over his head to cover his face because he didn't want anyone to recognize him or to see how ashamed he was. The stripping off, which St. Paul talks about, is not an easy. It's a spiritual exercise, which involves, in the presence of God, casting off symbolic layers of dirt and grime in the form of habits, pretenses and falsehoods. There's a sense in which we can be completely open and receptive to God when we are stripped of all that we seek to hide behind. We cannot pretend to be somebody else when we're naked. A Carmelite nun described the essence of being a Carmelite thus, "the poor ones, standing completely exposed to God, with nothing to offer but their needs and emptiness."

We come before God naked so that he can clothe us. That is the key point of what I am saying this morning. We don't come before God so that he can judge us or humiliate us. We come before God so that he can clothe us. There's a wonderful image of this in Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan. You might remember the end of that story, when, as the errant son comes home, no doubt wearing rags, and the father clothes him. He puts a robe on him, a new robe. He puts a ring on his finger. He puts sandals on his feet. That's an image of what I'm talking about here. God, clothing us. Replacing rags with new robes.

So much for nakedness. Let me move on to what St. Paul might mean when he encourages us to be clothed with Christ. And this is one of Paul's favorite images. It actually recurs throughout his writings. He often says using the same verb, "Put on Christ." And having talked, as I quoted earlier, of him stripping off the old self in the book of Colossians, he then goes on to say, "Clothe yourself with the new self. Clothe yourselves, with love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." And he's picking up here on a theme from the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah says this, "I will rejoice in the Lord, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation."

He's saying something here about how items of clothing can bestow an identity on wearer. As I've mentioned earlier, that's how we construct an identity, an image of ourselves and clothing can even talk of status and depict our status. We see an example of that in sport. If you win the Masters Golf Tournament at Augusta, then you are presented with a green jacket. You put on a green jacket. If you are a cyclist and you are winning the Tour de France, then you wear the yellow Jersey. So that if you see the peloton with all the cyclists spread out, you could immediately pick out which of the riders is leading the race because they're wearing the yellow Jersey. Those who are in grief, when we go to a funeral, we'll often choose to wear black as a sign that we are mourning.

And of course there are uniforms. This weekend, we are witnessing Catherine Gordon, one of our longstanding parishioners be ordained priest. And as she is ordained as a priest, she won't just be wearing a collar, but she'll be wearing her stole like this,

rather than have it all to one side as a deacon wears. So the way she wears her stole will indicate she has gone from being a deacon to a priest. Clothing can speak of our identity and our status. And Paul knew that. And that's the context behind the imagery which he's developing here. He says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ." Baptism is a change of status. So putting on Christ is a natural follow up to that change of status. That's what is indicated by being baptized. Putting on Christ is a symbolic expression of that change of status that comes with baptism, as we come to believe in Jesus Christ. The baptized go from a state of sin and alienation to putting on being covered by God's grace and salvation. Baptism for us, represents and symbolizes who we are, namely a child of God. In baptism our status changes to children of God, from those who were lost and alienated from God. In baptism, we are adopted into God's family and being a child of God is the basis, therefore, of our identity, of our self understanding, of the image that we present to the world. We are God's children before we are anything else. We don't need to strive to impress or construct an identity. Our identity is given to us in baptism.

We are God's beloved children. We need to lean into that wherever we are on our spiritual journey. To remind ourselves again and again that our status has changed. We've been adopted into God's family. We are God's children. And we give expression to that as we daily put on Christ. We base our understanding of ourselves from the fundamental basis that we are God's children. That is who we are before we're anything else. Before we claim any other identity or dress ourselves in any other metaphorical or real clothes, we remember that we are children of God. Let's put on Christ. We clothe ourselves with Christ, because we are God's children. Our true self, our authentic self emerges from that wonderful truth.

Amen.