

Dressed for the Occasion

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Ah, the constantly recurring dilemma: you've been invited to attend an event of some kind – maybe a party, or a dinner, or some other special affair – and you'd really like to be there. But then comes the question: What should I wear? Okay, to be more accurate, typically if you're female the question comes almost immediately, if you're male the question comes much later (usually something like five minutes before you're supposed to be there); but either way, sooner or later you have to face it. You have to decide what clothes you're going to put on. And you want to choose wisely because we've all been to something and had that uncomfortable feeling of being either grossly overdressed or underdressed for the occasion. If you err in one direction, you fear that people will think you're a snob; lean too far the other way and they'll think you're a slob. Either way, it's bad. So you want to choose correctly.

Now, sometimes your host will give you a hint by telling you whether the event is formal or informal. But this is not always helpful. I mean, what exactly is "casual", "sport", or "business attire"? With regard to the latter, I suppose it depends on what sort of business you're in. And that's the problem: do these terms mean the same thing to you as they do to the host and to the other guests who will be there? Further complicating things is the general drift of our culture toward informality with regard to the clothing we wear. For example, many businesses now have "Casual Fridays"; for most places it means you can wear blue jeans to work that day. I'm not sure what it means if you have a job at which jeans are the standard to begin with. I'm not sure I want to know. But this is just one indicator of the trend in our whole culture which is moving toward being "less dressed up". What used to be considered unacceptably relaxed is progressively more becoming the norm. I sure you've noticed it. And mind you I'm not criticizing or complaining about it – just making an observation. Lord knows that I'm as complicit as anyone in the general trend. As a rule, I don't like to dress up.

This being said, even with our increasingly lax standards, there are some limits. No one is likely to go to work in pajamas or come here to church in grungy gym clothes. If you have E-mail, no doubt you've been subjected to one or more of those collections of photos that get passed around entitled "The people of Wal-Mart". They're supposedly candid shots of actual people out shopping; but they're more like the very worst of what not to wear—*ever*. The outfits displayed range from the brazenly bizarre to the downright disgusting. If you've seen any of these, then you know what I'm talking about; if not, then you can be grateful that your eyes have been spared. But my point is the very existence of such collections says that even as a society generally known for its tolerance and laxity with regard to dress, we still do have expectations for how people should present themselves in public – and the folks in the pictures have clearly crossed the line. (And hopefully no one here has ever seen one of these Wal-Mart collections and while looking through them has said, "Hey! Wait a minute: that's *me!*")

What I'm saying, though, is that shifting standards and hard-to-define terms with regard to attire make it difficult to know for sure how to be properly dressed for any occasion. What is appropriate? That's the question – for say a wedding, a funeral, a graduation, a night at the opera, or dinner at a certain restaurant; because we all recognize that there are certain occasions at which you simply must be dressed up. The question is: how much?

Now, perhaps you're wondering, "What's all this talk about clothing? Has Pastor become a fashionista?" No; not at all. And if I ever do, somebody please shoot me. That would be the merciful thing to do. No, the issue is this: today we enter the penitential season of Advent. It's a time of spiritual preparation for a very special event: the coming of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ – yes, his coming at Christmas, when God fulfilled his promise to send his Son into this world to be our Savior from sin; but in a greater sense, it's his final coming that we're looking forward to, because we know that just as sure as Jesus came the first time and completed all that was necessary to redeem us, so also he will come again with great glory to judge the living and the dead. It could happen at any time. And for that very reason, we want to be sure at all times that we are properly dressed for the occasion.

And no, I'm not talking about the physical clothes on your body; I'm talking about the spiritual garments with which you clothe your soul. This is what St. Paul is saying in today's Epistle reading: it's time to wake up and get out of bed. The Day of the Lord is dawning. You need to get up and get dressed so that you are prepared to meet him; because, trust me, you don't want to be improperly attired when that Day comes.

What should you wear? Well, Paul starts first with what not to wear. "Cast off the works of darkness", he tells us. And then he lists what some of them are: orgies and drunkenness, sexual immorality and sensuality, quarreling and jealousy. I'm certain his list could be longer; but what he's talking about are the obvious sins in your life – the stuff you're doing that you know you shouldn't. And it's important to understand that he's referring to God's standards, not those of the culture in which we live. At the time Paul wrote these words to the Christians at Rome orgies, drunkenness, and sexual immorality were rampant in their society. They were socially acceptable behaviors among the pagans. And many of the people in the congregation had converted to Christianity from that pagan culture. They had to learn that such things were simply not acceptable among the children of God.

The same is true in our day. Just as we've become more relaxed in our standards of attire, so also many behaviors once universally recognized as sins have gained acceptance in our culture at large. Sexual relations outside of marriage, homosexuality, easy "no-fault" divorce and remarriage, pornography, gossiping, character assassination, materialism, gluttony, to name but a few – these things are not only tolerated, they are actively encouraged and celebrated by our society. And when we receive people into our fellowship from that world and way of thinking, they have to be trained that such things are not acceptable among those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. But let me tell you, it's awfully hard to teach them when they look at other members of the church and see such things going on in their lives. Honestly, sometimes we who claim to be God's own children show as much discernment regarding what to wear as the do the people of Wal-Mart. Paul is saying, "Don't you be one of them. Don't wrap yourself in filth and sin and imagine that you're ready to receive your King. You must cast off such garments of darkness."

That's a great place to start – with the sins you are aware of; but it's only part of what must be cast off. For the rest we need to jump over to today's Gospel reading. There we find the Lord Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. His followers are hailing him as their King. They cry out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" – which means *save us now, please, we beg you!* But what's interesting to me is that instead of getting dressed up, they spontaneously begin dressing down. They take off their outer garments and lay them in the street before Jesus. This would be the woolen cloaks they wore over linen tunics. So they are effectively stripping down to their T-shirts and shorts. And their cloaks become sort of a makeshift red carpet to smooth the way for Jesus.

Now, on the surface level, what they are doing is an act of honor – one that shows submission. It's something they would have done for a hero who's just returned from a victorious campaign against their enemies as a way of showing their loyalty and appreciation. But it illustrates for us how we should prepare spiritually to receive our King. In the Bible there's a consistent metaphor about clothing. It's what we use to hide our shame and nakedness. Physically we do this with clothing. Spiritually we do it with outwardly good behavior, that is, our so-called righteous deeds. You see, we don't want anyone to know what we're really thinking, what we'd really like to say to them, and how we really are deep inside, so we clothe our unclean souls with words and actions that appear – on the surface at least – to be good. In fact, sometimes we do this so well that we fool even ourselves. We look in the spiritual mirror, decide we look pretty good, and imagine that all is well inside.

And this, my friends, is a bigger obstacle to being prepared to receive Jesus than are your obvious sins. At least with the latter you know what you're dealing with. You know they're dirty and that they stink to high heaven. But with our imagined good deeds and behaviors – the little fig leaves with which we try to hide the truth – we think we're dressed and ready. But listen: it didn't work in the Garden of Eden, and it won't work for us either. You can almost see Adam and Eve standing there in their floral finery before the Lord and him saying, "You can't be serious. Who are you trying to kid by wearing an outfit like that?" He says the same thing to you and me. You think the TSA has X-ray vision that can see through your clothes? Does that make you uncomfortable? They haven't got anything on the Lord. He knows every shameful thought of your mind and evil motive of your heart. And your outward attempts to cover up before him just make you that much more pathetic and foolish in his sight. But the real problem for you personally is that by covering up and deceiving yourself about your own inherent goodness, you fail to see your need for a Savior. Those who are well don't need a doctor. And those who think themselves good don't need Jesus, God's Son, to suffer and die for them.

Therefore part of our preparation must be to join the crowd in casting off these garments too. We must allow Jesus to trample them – all our imagined righteousnesses – under his feet where they belong. Then the way for his coming will be smooth and easy. Then we can get ready to receive him as the Savior we need.

But thus far we've only considered what to take off. We still need to know what to put on so that we're properly dressed for the occasion of Christ's coming. Again in the Epistle, having cast off what we don't want to wear, Paul tells us to put on the armor of light. And armor, of course, is what a soldier wears. It means we need to be dressed and ready for a fight. And elsewhere Paul writes about what the armor of light consists of. There's the belt of truth – the truth that sees and confesses your sins. There is the breastplate of righteousness. It's the righteousness of Christ that covers your heart and vital organs. There's the shield of faith – which is your trust in Christ and what *he* has done to save you. And there's the helmet of salvation, which protects your thoughts by keeping your mind focused on the goal. Wearing these you'll be dressed and ready when Jesus comes – and just as importantly, you'll be able to stay in the fight until he does; because it is a fight that you're in, and the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh would all like to see you lose it.

So, how do we put on this armor of light? The simple answer is that *you* don't. Jesus Christ puts it on you. Like a bride whose attendants help her put on her wedding gown, or a knight whose squire and armorer put him into all his gear, you become clothed to receive Jesus by Jesus Christ himself. In fact, Paul even calls it putting on the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be dressed in him and by him. How? Well, we all together witnessed it just a little while ago when little Dayla was baptized. For as Paul reminds us, we who have been baptized into Christ

have been clothed in Christ. That's what Baptism is all about: it's Jesus Christ assuming us into his holy body in which he suffered and died for us. It's being united with him in his death, burial, and resurrection. It's having the sign of his cross placed upon us so that we are marked as one of God's own children. It's when and how he gives us his Holy Spirit so that we can trust and love him. And it's necessary to understand that while Baptism happens but once, we live in our Baptisms every day. And can we return to and renew our Baptisms every time we go to the Lord confessing our sins and hear again his word of forgiveness. This is how we ensure that our spiritual clothes are always clean and presentable, so that we will indeed be ready to receive the Lord when he comes.

And Paul says that we are to do this "making no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." What does this mean? It means we're not to hold anything back. This is the perpetual problem we have. Oh sure, we want to be disciples of Jesus and be ready for his coming; and yet at the same time we want to hold on to our favorite pet sins and to at least some portion of our sense of moral superiority. So we're willing to give up some; but not all. I mean really, aren't there Sundays when you stand here confessing that you are a poor miserable sinner and that you are heartily sorry for your sins – while at the same time thinking about and planning your next excursion into sin? Or, while confessing, you're thinking about how someone else should be here confessing because they need it more than you do? This is the kind of provision for self-gratification that Paul is talking about. It's like getting all dressed up in Christ but leaving on your dirty underwear and stinky socks. To be dressed and ready, we need to go all the way.

And we need to do this not just for ourselves. That's what we see in the Gospel lesson: a parade of people going before and after Jesus, singing his praises and announcing his arrival to the bewildered city of Jerusalem. The inhabitants look out on the procession and ask, "What's all the commotion? Who is this who's coming?" The same thing is happening in our day. Practically everyone is getting ready for Christmas – they're all wrapped up in the festivities of the season; but very few of have any idea that what it's really all about is the coming of Christ and how they should be preparing themselves for that. Being prepared for his coming ourselves is one of the most powerful tools of witness we have. Then people will actually pay attention when we sing our hosannas and praises to the Lord whose birth we shall soon celebrate. And they'll ask, "What's going on? Who is this?" Then we'll be able to tell them: this is Jesus of Nazareth, our Savior, prophet, priest, and King. And they'll know we speak the truth because they will see him in our words and actions.

Therefore let us get up and get ready, both for ourselves and for the people around us, that we all may be properly dressed for the occasion when Jesus comes. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!