

Sermon Archive 544

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Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Human rights: Access to clothing

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Reflection: A family photo, a famous photo and some anecdotes

The United Nations' Declaration on Universal Human Rights says that everyone has the right to access clothing.

The family photo is of two brothers, standing outside their grandmother's house at 18 Grassways Avenue, Pakuranga, Tāmaki Makaurau. It must have been one of those rare days in Auckland when it was raining, since they're dressed in their cheap plastic rain coats, with their cheap plastic rain hats on - said hats crowning the outfit with glory. When I became a teenager, I moved on to the oil skin rain coat - which got oil all over everything everywhere. What I remember from the cheap plastic raincoat of early days, though, was the sound they made when swinging arms rubbed against the torso. Shhh, shhh, shhh, shhh. I can't remember, and the photo doesn't show whether our feet rested in Roman sandals or gumboots. Being well-equipped boys, we had both in our wardrobes.

In the summer months, when raincoats weren't required (although this was Auckland), some of us went to school barefoot. Some had shoes at home, but chose not to wear them. Others didn't have shoes at home - but the barefoot culture kind of blurred the lines between the haves and the have-nots. Do some children go to school barefoot these days? It seems they do. How is their lack of foot wear read? What does it mean?

Talking of footwear, when I taught English in China, my employer made explicit that flip flops or jandals were not acceptable attire for teachers. On one ferociously hot day, I went to work in jandals. I was called to account. I was fined my whole day's income for being incorrectly dressed. My supervisor attended my one-to-one class with a wee boy whose English name was Simon, to make sure that I apologized to him for being inappropriately casual. My employment contract allowed for all of this to happen.

Talking of employment, although technically I am not employed here at Knox, the standard terms of call for Presbyterian ministers include a clothing allowance. At the moment, each year you give me (I think) \$159.00 so that I can dress appropriately.

And talking of dressing for church, two things:

(1) At the end of 1988, the Presbytery of Auckland noted that I had satisfied the training requirements of the Church, and issued me with a "probationer's licence to preach". I became a Reverend person. At that time I bought the white frock that I've worn to worship since. I remember, putting it on for the first time, and thinking to myself "you've conducted worship many times already. Why, in putting on this frock, do you feel you need to do a better job?" Clothes, particularly uniforms, come with many strings attached.

And (2) In the olden days, to church, women wore hats and gloves. Men wore suits - at least ties. Why? Where did the gloves, hats and suits go? Do we care? Is it not more important that some children are barefoot.

Second to last, we have a painting by Nineteenth / Twentieth Century French painter Leon Joseph Florentin Bonnat - of Job. A classical Biblical character who lost everything - in some weird experiment about faith. He loses his wealth, his family, his mental stability. Bonnat presents him as having lost everything, right down to his clothes. I wonder; when you're in the process of losing everything, at what point do you lose your clothes? I imagine that the loss of clothes is pretty much the ultimate symbol of having lost everything.

And lastly, a picture called "Napalm Girl", from the Vietnam War, 1972. The girl's name was Phan Thi Kim Phuc. Her village had been bombed by South Vietnamese forces, and her clothes had been burned off her. Kim now speaks all around the world at events advocating non-violence. At once time some years ago, when moved by some non-violence impulse, I posted the famous photo on facebook. Facebook removed my post, saying the image of a naked girl had breached community standards by being obscene.

I agreed with facebook that when a child's clothes are blown off her body by bombs, it is, indeed, obscene.

Clothing.

The first of two Bible readings about clothing.

The First Lesson: Genesis 3: 8-14, 21

A Reflection: Who told you that you were naked?

It's interesting, isn't it, that the first signal that something had gone wrong in the garden, was the sense of shame that the man and the woman suddenly felt about being naked. They'd always been naked, but that had never been a problem. It was just how they were, and nothing was wrong with it. But now this sense comes upon them that nakedness is tricky. They can't possibly be seen naked by God. We heard God's voice in the cool of the evening, and rushing upon us

is this sense of panic that we might be seen. I wonder whether this is a very perceptive bit of writing by the author of this part of the Genesis story - the tying up of growing up with shyness about who we are.

Bath time in the Jack household in the very early days: three little children, one bath, all in there together. No second thought - no first thought really either. We just jumped into the bath - maybe it was easier for Mum and Dad to bathe us all at once - water-rich but time poor!

Some years on, the oldest Jack opts out. Then the second Jack. Then the third. Gradually there comes a need for privacy - a time to keep to ourselves the bodies we inhabit. Self-consciousness. Shyness. It's not like we suddenly became ugly and had to hide it. There was nothing wrong with how we looked. There's just something about growing up . . . and the need not to be seen - until, for many of us, we are happy to be seen by certain eyes that we choose, when we know the eyes are attached to people who are safe. For the man and the woman, God didn't seem safe, so they hid themselves.

In the story, God knows what's happened. The fear of being seen is somehow connected to a lie that needs to be covered - a breaking of trust that's occurred. "God, thou seest me" - and you see right through to the eating of the apple. In our unattractive ambition, our ugly breaking of word, our unwelcome experience of guilt, we feel naked, so we hide.

God's first response is to say "I know". I know what's happened here. And then God sets out what this means for how the world is going to work. We're familiar with that part of the story - tell it at every Nine Lessons and Carols, as the serpent is cursed to crawl on its belly all the days of its life.

God's second response is much less famous. It is to make garments for the embarrassed woman and man. They want to hide themselves, so that God will not see who they are - but they can't. God already knows who they are; and you can't spend your life hiding. So God gives them clothes. Clothed, they are equipped to come out of hiding (well, at least physical hiding), and live a new kind of protected life. Clothing protects them.

Will they remember the days of care-free existence, before guilt was part of the picture? Maybe. Maybe there will be a sadness, or if not sadness, then at least nostalgia - for the days before we felt a need to cover up. But in moving beyond the time of hiding, they learn something about the kindness of God - who appreciates their fear, and gives them clothing.

It is argued that human beings have a basic, universal right to clothing. Could clothing be understood as a right to privacy, to freedom to get about the world

without shame. Could it be seen as a gift of dignity? A God-given right to move around the world with dignity . . .

The Second Lesson: Matthew 25: 32-40

A Reflection: When did we see you naked, and clothe you?

The God who gave clothes to the man and the woman at the beginning of time, inspired Jesus, whom we call the Christ, to bring a new dignity to the human condition and to call us in our life together to manifest the kindness of God. He spoke of a great reckoning for the world, where our deeds will be uncovered - made naked for us all to see.

And one of the images in this great revealing will come in the form of someone saying "I was naked, and you clothed me". There is to be great significance given to how we clothe one another - save one another from that crazy sense of shame that's just part of how we live in the world just now. Do we enable people not to be cold? Do we enable people not to feel ashamed? Do we enable people to come out of their hiding?

Time disallows us much opportunity to explore this fully. But the point is obvious: whatever we make of the image of clothing and nakedness, and shame and liberty, God calls the people of Christ to clothe one another. For as we clothe one another, we take our place among those who are blessed.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights seeks to be a faith-free and culture-free document. We come at rights differently. We come as those called to clothe one another in the name of Christ.

How does this sound in our ears? How does this sit in our hearts? Everyone has the right to clothing?

We keep a moment of quiet.

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