

## Being Clothed In Christ & For Christ

### Being Clothed In Christ

The word *prophet* can mean someone who predicts what is going to happen in the future. However, in the scriptural sense, it means someone who speaks up for God and the things of God.

In the first book of the Kings there is the story about God sending Elijah to anoint Elisha as prophet. He is busy ploughing one day when, without any warning, Elijah appears on the scene and throws his mantle, his cloak, over Elisha, an action that he somehow seems to understand. We are familiar with the phrase “to take over the mantle” meaning to succeed someone in their position. Elisha’s mission (if he accepts it) is, figuratively and literally, to take over the mantle of prophet. As Elijah is taken up to heaven, he leaves his cloak behind for Elisha, a symbol of his God-given authority.

During the sacrament of baptism, immediately after the pouring of water, a white garment (usually a shawl) is placed over the baby and the accompanying prayer in part says: “You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity.” From that point onwards in our life we have been clothed in Christ, we have symbolically put on the mantle of Christ. Next comes the lighting of a baptismal candle: “This child of yours has been enlightened by Christ. He/she is to walk always as a child of the light.” In both these actions we are given our Christian mission – to be witnesses to our faith, prophets for Christ responsible for the spreading of the gospel and of the kingdom.

It is precisely the same call as that received by the apostles – the word *apostle* simply meaning one who is sent. The apostles were sent out by Christ, taking up his mantle, “missioned” with spreading the gospel and witnessing to their faith, being prophets speaking up for God and the things of God: “Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation.” (Mk 16 v 15) “Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations...and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you.” (Mt 28 v 19)

We are reminded of this same mission that we share with the apostles at the end of every Mass when we are instructed: “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord”. Go from this place, out into the world, and put into practice the word of God you have heard and live the eucharist, the communion, you have received. It’s like running in a marathon and stopping briefly for a drink of water. We don’t just drink for the refreshment that we feel there and then – we are re-hydrating our system for the miles we still have to run.

**B**eing a prophet for Christ isn't always going to be easy. Remember the brothers James and John? Depending on which gospel account you read, either their mother approached Jesus or they approached him themselves, seemingly looking for some sort of assurance of the return they might expect for following him. Jesus says: "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" (Mt 20; Mk 10) On another occasion he said: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mt 16 v 24)

**T**here will be times when, as followers of Christ, we will have to stand up and be counted. It can be a tough call especially when it means being a prophet – speaking up for God and the things of God – before family or friends. But we will never have to pay as high a price as Christ himself paid in his love for us. In our love for him are we willing to accept the (by comparison) insignificant price that witnessing to our faith and to what is right and wrong may cost us? "If anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven." (Mt 10 v 32 – and let's hope we don't have to hear what he goes on to say in v33 about those who disown him.)

**J**esus also offered these words of encouragement: "Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time." (Mt 28 v 20) He is never going to ask or expect more of us than he knows we are capable of with the help of his grace - and that is always an important thing to remember... the help of his grace. If we think about St Peter walking on the water (Mt 14 v 28-33) doing the impossible with the help of God's grace, or of the well-known "Footprints" poem, God carrying us when life gets difficult, or dip into – and it's quite a dip! - the secular religion of football and the Anfield anthem "You'll never walk alone" (one of those references must be familiar), God is indeed always with us and so is his grace. It just needs us to remember it and to call on that help and strength at those times when we need the courage to stand up and be counted.

**We** have been clothed *in* Christ *by* Christ; let us then wear his mantle with conviction and pride.

### **Being Clothed for Christ**

**D**uring a recent visit to friends in America, they were telling me about a talk their priest had given at Mass on the subject of dress code. His point wasn't to lay down any actual rules or regulations on the subject, but simply to make the point that where people will dress formally for important social occasions or if they are to meet dignitaries, or that their places of work may require a particular dress code, they don't seem to consider that coming into God's presence in church warrants such signs of formality and respect. It's an interesting point.

**P**eople used to wear their “Sunday best” for church on Sundays and other important occasions – some still do – but by and large that seems to have gone as a practice. Of course it could be argued that God isn’t interested in how we look on the outside and, certainly, coming to Mass shouldn’t become a fashion parade. I think the point this priest was making had more to do with that basic question of whether we have really thought about what it is we are doing when we come to church, who we are going to meet (God), and whether the way we dress is as appropriate as it should be for coming into his house of prayer to celebrate the greatest sacramental event of our day or our week.

**I** don’t know whether this is true in other nominally Catholic countries, but it is interesting that (in Italy) in Rome many churches enforce a very strict dress code. Outside of St Peter’s for example, a church particularly popular with tourists, there are illustrated signs stating that men should be wearing long trousers and women shouldn’t have bare shoulders or be wearing shorts or short skirts. Anyone not complying with this dress code is not admitted. This isn’t the Church being prudish, but is a reminder to people that they are coming into a church and into the presence of God and that this requires an appreciation of the need not only for respect and reverence, but also for modesty – not always a widely held quality in our society.

**B**y and large I think most people do dress appropriately in church – perhaps not necessarily in their “Sunday best” anymore, though at least that practice may have reflected people’s awareness that where they were going, and what they were about to do, was special. Where appropriateness often goes out of the window, however, is at weddings and perhaps this is because there are typically a lot of people at weddings who are not ordinarily church-going. By the same token it is a sad reflection on our society that, whether church-going or not, many people seem to have no idea what it means to be in church and, in the case of a Catholic church, what it means to be in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Because everyone is probably heading directly to the reception as soon as the ceremony is over, they come to church in attire more appropriate for nightclubbing.

**A**ware of the potentially sexist minefield I may be entering into, in the case of men there isn’t usually a problem – a suit is a suit is a suit - but for women it can be an entirely different story. In the area of what might be politely called *décolletage*, between the bride, her bridesmaids and some of the assembled (female) guests, there is very often far too much *décoll* and not nearly enough *etage*! (as we might say). I’ve had one or two weddings where one good cough from the bride might have given me a coronary, and one, indeed, where the registrar (providentially seated nearby) had to come to the rescue of a bride who leaned forward a little too far to attend to the hem of her dress. Such styles and

fashions, whether on brides or guests, are really not appropriate in church where we should be able to expect and experience modesty, reverence and respect.

**I**t could be argued that what might be seen as undue conservatism could turn people away from church, but I would suggest, rather, that anything that promotes and preserves a sense of the sacred in our churches might well be more respected than giving in to the standards of the society around us. And, again, like that priest in America I am not laying down rules or regulations, but just mentioning the subject as food for thought.

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