

## **‘What shall we wear today?’**

Sermon for Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> October by Mark Pilgrim: Matthew 22.1-14

Thursday has become an interesting day for me. It involves several clothing changes. First, I get ready to walk our dog before breakfast. Can I have just a jersey or do I need anorak, boots and waterproof trousers too? Then I need to think about the 10.30 Communion service. I check I am wearing a clerical shirt – and then think ‘Is my dog collar where it should be - in the drawer by the front door?’ When in church, I have to remember to put my radio mic on before my white cassock alb. If I don’t, it’s a real bind trying to thread the mic through the alb!

Since the beginning of September, I have taken on an additional responsibility: for about 4 hours per week, being chaplain to QEH school. At the moment this means going to the school on Thursday afternoons to be with students for their Enrichment programme. Every time I go I need to wear the recognisable ‘teacher uniform’ of collar and tie – having worn a clerical shirt in the morning! As soon as I get back, I want to take the restrictive tie off – and I do!

Wearing the right clothes can be important and tricky to get right. Different situations demand different clothes. Different people are comfortable and effective in different clothes too.

The reason for reflecting on what I wear on Thursdays is that what we wear in public is key to today’s Gospel passage. Let’s see what it can say to us, the attenders of St Peter’s, about our mission as followers of Jesus today.

You may have been surprised, in the first half of the parable, by the vengefulness of the king – who is much more violent than we expect a figure standing in for God to be. This can be explained as Matthew taking a parable original to Jesus and allegorising it to incorporate Jewish and Christian dismay at the destruction by the Romans of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. But let’s focus quickly on the second half.

Here, the royal wedding host notices that a guest invited in from the byways is not wearing the wedding clothes which custom dictated the host would provide and guests would wear. The royal host deals with this failure in alarming fashion. He orders his servants to throw the guest out ‘into the darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.’

From Matthew’s perspective, there is only one group to fill the role of this guest in the parable – the Christian community. Invited to God’s feast after his original guests, the people of Israel had failed to respond positively, the ‘dragged in’ guests now include all Gentile Christians.

In the early church – and still in some ways today – coming to faith in Christ and being baptised was and is signified not only by the language of ‘putting on Christ’ but also literally putting on and wearing different, ‘baptismal’ clothes. Baptism and its disciplines should equip and prepare the baptised to lead lives marking them out, in one way or another, as followers of Christ.

So, my question now is: ‘What are we wearing today?’ Is God seeing us wearing clothes enabling us to commend Christ and share Christian faith in our own time?

Last Sunday, at our AGM, I offered a snapshot of where I thought St Peter’s was now and what might be a couple of priorities for the future. In terms of clothing, you could see the three adjectives and two priorities I offered as five T shirts: ‘St Peter’s: Open’, ‘St Peter’s: Flexible’, ‘St Peter’s: Caring’ – and then ‘St Peter’s – embraces technology!’ and ‘St Peter’s –builds teams!’

Then, as I read today’s gospel and thought about us at St Peter’s taking the place of the guest whose attire is questioned by the king, I found myself asking ‘How would – how is – God judging us now? Will being open, flexible and caring, will putting a priority on technology and team building be enough for our Lord

and King to commend and congratulate us? Or is putting on these 'T shirts' less than effective in bringing in the kingdom in the way God wants us to do today?

I wonder. Let's all think about it. I look forward to doing some thinking with the new Strategy Team which will advise the PCC on future priorities and come into being in the next few weeks. Our vision – the job we want our Christian clothing to equip us for – is seeing 'Lives transformed by following Christ in love and service'. We deliver our vision through our Mission: to 'Worship God. Make Friends. Change the World'. To stay with the image of clothing, it seems to me we have some clothes for kingdom building through St Peter's already, in the shape of our 'Fuelling the Fires of Faith' wardrobe. It consists of five polo shirts. One is labelled 'Faith in Action', another 'Faith in Prayer'. The next is 'Faith in Culture', then 'Faith in Community' and finally 'Faith Seeking Understanding'. We acquired this wardrobe of distinctive Christian 'clothes' from the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity and its Faith on the Frontline material some four or five years ago.

The question I'm asking all of us now, six months into Covid, is 'These may be our clothes – but are they actually the right clothes for commending Christ today?' Is it enough for St Peter's attenders to wear T shirts saying Open, Flexible and Caring? Is it enough to have embracing technology and building teams wide as our priorities for mission? How appropriate are these 'clothes' in the view of our Lord and King?

You'll be glad to hear, as I begin to review our performance myself, that I think these clothing choices are not misplaced. It seems to me each item in the wardrobe enables kingdom activity through which we will express and share our Christian faith.

What has changed and is changing is the environment in which we get to wear this wardrobe. Covid has changed and is changing how we can minister God's love and communicate his truth in the world. Relationships are having to be developed and sustained in new ways. No longer, for instance, can we rely on touch and smiles to communicate empathy and encouragement – not when we have to keep 2 metres apart and guess facial features when covered by masks.

Let me end with this example from my own experience. An opportunity for me to re-assess my 'frontline' for faith has come through being Secretary of my sailing club in the Docks. The Committee of which I am a part has spent hours and hours rewriting a Constitution which is now very out of date. The process has generated great heat and quite a lot of aggravation among some of the Club's 45 members. In the midst of this friction I have found myself 'pastoring' the Club Commodore as he came under fire and didn't know how to deal with the conflict that had arisen. I have also found myself thinking about Christian ethics. Some of the advice I offered relied on one group beating another in a democratic vote: but the way forward we have now chosen is less confrontational and more inclusive than I myself had suggested. This conflict has come about in part, I suggest, because club members haven't been able to relax and talk together much this year. Email conversation is no substitute for face to face chat: tempers have frayed as a result. The situation has been a storm in a teacup – but it has nevertheless given me an opportunity to reflect on applying my faith to my personal frontline.

So: 'What shall we wear today?' What clothes for further unveiling God's kingdom does our Lord and King want us to wear this week and in the coming months? Are the ones we are wearing now and likely to wear in future the right ones for the job? Do they need adjusting – taking in here, letting out there? Do they need complementing or adding to with additional or supplementary items of clothing?

Your thoughts and advice on St Peter's current wardrobe will be interesting to have. Let me know as soon as you like!