

Sermon Archive 146

Friday 14 April, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Isaiah 64: 6-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



When you were born, Lord, it was on the move – and then on the run. They dressed you in strips of cloth, because there were no handy drawers full of clothes. Your clothes were cobbled-together things, ripped from “thrown away” stuff. The wee babe, come to save the world, was wrapped at start in strips of cloth. In a disturbed and improvising time, wrapped swaddling bands – just strips of cloth.

Now you are soon to be dead. And once again, because it is their custom, they will wrap you in cloths. One of those great circles of artistic consistency – book-ends around your life (your extraordinary life) of being wrapped in cloth! A cloth to cover the face. A cloth to cover the hands and feet. A cloth as clothing for the rest of the body. Grave clothes – for a person who is no more. Beginnings and endings, leaving home and coming home – wrapped in ripped, torn, disassembled strips of cloth.

Between those book ends, Lord, do you remember the woman who felt like, if she could just touch the hem of your garment, she’d be healed? No strips of cloth just then! The clothes of the living and healing. They were clothes sweeping through crowds of people fired with hope – clothes that dressed you for all manner of miracle!

And how about the clothes that day you hitched them up around your waist? When you used them to wipe the water from the feet you’d just slave-like washed?

Do you remember the time you told the crowds never to worry about what they would wear - because, in the hands of God, even the flowers of the fields, that were here today and gone tomorrow, were so faithfully protected, beautifully dressed, shielded, covered, defended! “How much

more will your father in heaven clothe **you**" you said. "By grace, you will be clothed" you said. The God who covers. The God who beautifies. The God who shelters. The God who dignifies.

From the old writings, dear Lord. "Put on the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." [Isaiah 61:3] "Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness." [Catherine Winkworth] "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you." Clothed for life – such life! [Paul, to the Colossians]

But no, today, it's grave clothes – strips of cloth - ripped and torn for someone ready to be dead.

God, they know how his goes – this dressing for sorrow. Their story is full of mourning. When someone dies, it's sackcloth and ashes. It's the shaving of the head. It's the rending of the garments – turning that which covers and protects us, turning that which speaks of our status and elegance, turning our privacy and safety, into strips of cloth. My God, you enter your world, and you leave your world, in strips of cloth.

Your other sadder outfits?

The seamless tunic that the soldiers gambled for once your fate was sealed. I guess the lawyers could argue over whether it was theft or abandonment. (Finders, keepers; losers - - - weepers.) Whatever, your last piece of clothing was decided to be "not divisible", so "roll the dice, and see who wins. Where this criminal is going he won't need clothing!" (Dust and ashes, strips of cloth.

And how about the **crown** they weaved you? The crown of belittling and blood-letting. An adornment of sadistic violence – an item of clothing that never should even have been an idea in anyone's mind!

And then the purple cloak they put on your shoulders, and bowed to? Purple, the colour of emperors – all found and given to make you feel small, dismissed and broken! "Hail, king of the Jews! Behold the man! We have no king but Caesar! Crucify this one – he's not our king!" You

are mocked in purple!

And the final outfit! Artists dare not depict it. But you'd have been crucified naked. No covering. No sheltering. The whole city looks and sees – nowhere for you to go and hide - and this is part of what they do to you while you die.

When those who love you later wrap you in strips of cloth, it will be, among other things, a loving attempt at restoring your dignity. It will be a partial recovering of your privacy – although you won't know it, because you'll be dead, and all the shame and laughter will already have completed its work.

Coming **into** life in strips of cloth; **going out of** life in strips of cloth. Both acts of coping and love! Improvised, inadequate, the best that we could do . . . Strips of cloth for the late Saviour Jesus.

An old prophet once said, dear Lord, that all our clothes are like filthy rags. He said that even our greatest deeds were like sackcloth and ashes. As you are wrapped in strips of cloth, I wonder how our God sees us. Filthy rags? Shrouded people – dank and ugly? Faded people, like goodness covered us up to keep the dust out, but then forgot about us and left us slightly frightening – almost like ghosts? As if straight after we wrapped you in cloth, we put ourselves into permanent shrouding? The robes of woe . . .

Will we always dress thus? Is there no way back to light and life – the garments of joy?

I don't know, Lord. This is something that you know alone. So for now, in my heart, if not with my hands, I tear some pieces of cloth for you. I remember your birth. I remember your death. I remember all you were to me – and offer my sadness and love.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, strips of cloth to strips of cloth.

On a day of sackcloth and ashes, Lord have mercy.

Amen.

-ooOoo-

The Reading of the Passion – John 18 & 19

Prayers for the World

A Hymn

-ooOoo-

Epilogue: Strips of cloth

According to Jewish burial traditions, the people who loved you wrapped you in strips of cloth. Cloth for the face. Cloth for the hands and feet. Cloth around the body. And when the dignities (and kindnesses) had been done, they left you there. They roll the stone across the door. They breathe. They compose themselves. They walk away.

Should a strange wind blow upon the graveyard, dear Lord, strips of cloth will blow through the air. Strips of cloth will catch on Judas trees. Strips of cloth will clog the drains and flood the earth – a baptism of tears. Some may even be neatly folded and put in the bottom of a cupboard – or an empty tomb.

I don't know, Lord. This is something that God alone knows. So for now, in my heart, if not with my hands, I tear some pieces of cloth for you. I remember your birth. I remember your death. I remember all you were to me – and offer my love.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, strips of cloth . . .

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