

## Sermon Archive 147

Sunday 16 April, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Isaiah 64: 6-12

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



*Instead of a spirit of despair, a garment of praise. Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love.*

-ooOoo-

The man in the bathroom mirror looks back at me. I think he's seeking my approval – or maybe I'm seeking his. The both of us have given thought to how to present today. It's a day of some sensitivity, and we want to go into it appropriately – dressed respectfully. I've chosen mostly black – because somehow that's what our culture adopted as the colour of mourning. Sackcloth and ashes for the ancients, but black for us. It's not compulsory, of course. It's just one of the ways that we show that we "get it" too. We understand the feelings of those around us, without using words, we say something about sharing the sorrow. It's all to do with going carefully, empathetically, appropriately into a world that's draped in black.

On my way to the grave, I see how others are dressed. They seem to have come to the party, in the main. One of them is carrying spices – traditional spices to finish the burial ritual that got interrupted before. They're moving with a slower than normal pace. They've dressed themselves in a quietness, a way of speaking that's slightly hushed. They've put on the face at repose – no wearing of smiles today. They do seem to have got what the day doth require. Our hearts are dressed for what the day doth require.

On Friday, my heart received a whole new dark-coloured wardrobe. A cloak of sorrow – because I'm going to miss him so much. A shirt of shock

– because I still can't quite believe how quickly it all turned to disaster. A belt of governed expectations of life – because if the good ones lose to the evil ones like this, then what's the point in hoping! You just have now not to expect very much from life. Be good! Get crucified! Go down into the grave! Experience teaches you this. Experience dresses you for this. We put on the colours of morning, reign in our expectations, and walk together, one muffled cortège, going slowly down to the grave. Again, it's not compulsory – but most of us do it anyway – allow ourselves to put on the spirit of despair, the inner clothing, the “heart” clothing, of defeat.

Suddenly, standing in our way, halting our funeral procession, are two men in dazzling white clothes. “What are you doing here?” they ask. “Why do you seek the living among the dead? Why are you dressed for mourning?” And behind them, as they speak, we spot Jesus' graveclothes folded up and put to the side. We'd dressed him for death as well – but now the linen's set off to the side. Wherever he is, he doesn't need death clothes – and his envoys come to us in dazzling clothes of life. Proclaim comfort to all who mourn, a crown of beauty instead of ashes, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair! If you have been raised with Christ, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love. Dress for resurrection. On Easter Day put on the garments of light.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we said that we had learned from experience – Good Friday experience. We said that we'd learned that the good ones often lose. We said we'd learned that justice is often not found. We said we'd learned not to expect too much from life – and to chant the mantra “nasty, brutish and short”. Yet on an Easter morning, mysterious figures, dressed for life, stand in our way. The central, light-shining mystery of Jesus' resurrection puts the grave clothes away. And disciples go home amazed – dressed in the garments of praise!

On my way home, in my quickened pace, I run into a black robed man. “People die”, he says. From his mournful heart, he says “death is strong; it always wins”. I say to him “The body's missing; it isn't there . . .”

I meet the woman with the funeral spices. “I'm going to do my duty”, she

says. "I'm going to complete the tasks that mark the ending". "I say "Don't be so sure. An ending may not be what you find".

I find the man who's given up on justice. "The bad ones won" he said. "The sooner we give up on naïve concepts like fairness and "the triumph of the good", the sooner we can settle into comfortable disappointment". I say to him "Don't get too comfortable in that sackcloth of yours. The unjusts' miserable judgement has been rolled like a stone".

On my way home, I run into so many people dressed for despair. They know it's not compulsory, but our world seems very skilled at winning their willingness to live as mourners. Experience has been an eloquent advocate for making of life a set of funeral clothes. But I am dressing differently now – more in the manner of those who've dressed in white. Following the lead of my Master, I'm folding the grave clothes, leaving them in the tomb, and stepping into light. I'm hearing the Easter story, and dressing for life. Am I in danger of being overdressed? Am I risking being out of sartorial step with the mood of my world? Am I chancing an accusation of world-view gaudiness (can you believe what he's wearing!)?

Maybe. But if Christ is risen, and if I have been raised with him, then God calls me to put on a garment of praise. A crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, the dazzling of light instead of the darkness of the tomb. If that will be seen as over-dressing, then that's OK.

-ooOoo-

The man in the bathroom mirror looks back at me. I think he's seeking my approval – or maybe I'm seeking his. The both of us have given thought to how to present today. We're putting aside our grave clothes, and walking into the day.

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