

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 7
SUNDAY 23 JUNE 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Luke 8: 26-39; Psalm 42; Galatians 3: 21-29



“Anniversary UCA”

Both our readings this morning speak about clothes, and being (or not being) clothed.

On the one hand we have Paul talking about being clothed with Christ, and on the other we have the Gerasene demoniac roaming naked amongst the graves.

In both our texts clothes are an indication of identity.

On the one hand we have Paul telling us that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, and on the other hand we have Luke telling us about a man of whom it is not clear what he is, because his identity is lost to a legion of demons amongst the dead.

When Paul speaks about being clothed with Christ he speaks of it as reflecting a new and different identity to what there was before. He argues that whatever we were, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, loses its significance after we die with Christ and rise to new life. The new life recognisable by the wearing of Christ, like a garment.

In Luke the Gerasene demoniac's nakedness, as much as his living among the dead, is a sign of his loss of identity, his loss of outward signs of status, personality and character. Living amongst the dead, he might as well have been dead. Stripped naked he has become a nameless bundle of demons tearing him apart, until there is nothing left but violent despair. He is kept in chains, judged unfit to be amongst other humans.

Clothes, clothing, identity, and the laying down of one identity to take on another reminded me of Church History trivia I read not so long ago in a book called “Through the eye of the needle, Wealth, the fall of Rome and the making of Christianity in the West”, by Peter Brown.

In it is the story of the fourth century Saint Augustine trying to set up a religious community, according to the ideals Paul sets out in his letter to the Galatians. Apparently the issues he encountered were many and varied, with believe it or not, clothes and clothing proving one of the most difficult to tackle.

In Saint Augustine's early Church community new members were expected to enter with only the clothes on their back, putting their money into communal funds and, perhaps, if that happened to be convenient, using some of their belongings to furnish the house they shared. As a community they would grow food themselves, or their family would occasionally leave some at the door, which would then be divided equally among all.

It was by sharing their material wealth and distancing themselves from their previous lives in this way that they tried to render irrelevant their previous status and standing in the world. Most of that worked well enough. Except for the clothes they'd entered the community with which they continued to wear. Taylor made, comfortable and good quality for the rich, rags for the poor. As there were no real poor in Augustine's community, the difference wasn't even that significant, but it apparently caused major difficulties nevertheless. Because there is nothing that speaks clearer language in distinguishing people than the clothes they wear.

Over time Augustine's friends were asked to leave their clothes at the door as well, and put on simple and practical outfits they could wear for work, for worship and for meal, study and fellowship time. Helping them to further realise the ideal of giving up their previous identities and taking on a new one, in Christ. Thus giving birth to what would later become the monk's habit.

But back to our scripture passages!

At the end of the story in Luke the clothes of the Gerasene demoniac are specifically mentioned. The people from his village find him clothed and in his right mind at Jesus' feet. Being dressed, the wearing of clothes functioning as an outward sign of that inward change that has happened to him. Through Jesus' healing power, his demons have been chased away, he's found his way out of the valley of death, to a new life, and a new identity. He has been clothed by Christ and has been given a new identity.

Now think back to what we have heard about Paul over the last three weeks. I may be stretching it, but isn't what happens here very similar to what happened to Paul? Wasn't he also found out of his right mind, in the valley of death, roaming the wilderness, dressed in violence, when he was found by Christ and given a new identity? Didn't the legion that was possessing him for a while leave him when Jesus, as uninvited as with the Gerasene, meets him and changes his life?

And there is another analogy: The Gerasene, clothed and in his right mind, is summoned to witness. Clothed with Christ and in his right mind Paul is also summoned to get on the road and witness.

And in both cases this meets with resistance from the community around them. In Luke Jesus is asked to leave. The people who have put up with a scary man in chains for years can't cope with one who heals this man and brings him back to life, clothed and in his right mind though he may be. Why? The text doesn't tell us more than that they were seized by great fear. The change Jesus brings is too much for them.

The man doesn't seem particularly keen to stay with the village that has looked after him for so many years either.

And anyone who has struggled, or seen someone struggle with mental issues, or has struggled with unpleasant personal 'histories' they want to leave behind, will know a community will find it exceedingly difficult to accept and embrace change in anyone.

A bit of the 'before' will always cling to you, no matter what you do. Moving away is often the only way to be the new you you've become. Clothed and in your right mind. But Jesus won't let him. He has to go back and witness to what has happened to him those who have known him before Jesus "redressed" him. What changes the healing power of Christ can bring.

What we have seen Paul do of course is move out. First into the wilderness to come to terms with his new identity, and then to the gentile world to witness. Taking off his old identity and putting on a new identity in Christ. Discovering that most of what constituted his old identity has become obsolete, and finding himself in conflict with people who find it very difficult to accept the radical changes he proposes and has begun to implement in his own life. His old life, his personal history, keeps continuing to bug him, and he keeps running into barriers he has become convinced no longer matter.

When we are in Christ, he says, nothing else matters. Not our ethnicity, not our denominational background, not our status, not our wealth, not even our gender. All we need is for Christ to cover us from head to toe, inside and out, all the rest is incidental. Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. A life in Christ is like a garment that is to be received and accepted as a gift of liberation, the same for each and every one of us. No matter who or what we were before.

Paul says that when we become Christians we need to leave our old clothes at the door, and forget about what we, or others, may have been wearing before. Accept that we are all in equal measure invited to become part of the new community in Christ that wears his life as their own, that adopts his way of being.

A way of being that transcends the differences that were before and brings us together into his life, inviting us to live it like he did, free of the barriers of ethnicity, worldly status or even gender.

I believe both Paul and Saint Augustine were probably still thinking fairly small in their imaginings of what this equality, this "being clothed with Christ" could mean. I don't think Paul ever imagined an end to all religious or ethnic differences among people when he wrote that in Christ there was no Jew or Greek. Or that he believed there could be a world without slavery. Or that there would be equality between male and female. He was still thinking of relationships inside the Christian community, and not outside it. And so was Augustine. Over the centuries Paul's words initiated other experiments with communal living and equality. Some successful and others fairly disastrous. Some met with fierce resistance of people who, like the villagers of Gerasene, were simply too overwhelmed and too scared by the proposed change, and some caused major shifts in the thoughts and attitudes of their time. But the seed sowed by Paul and taken up by people like Augustine have continued to grow, with the dream of unity, wholeness and peace one that we as Christians see as a hope, a vision, a future to work towards not only for our own communities, but for all creation.

So how far have we come since the days of Paul and Augustine? Where is the Church, the body supposedly clothed in Christ at now? Has there been any progress?

Looking for images on the internet for the service this Sunday I came across pictures of the collapse of the clothing factory in Bangladesh a couple of weeks ago. It made me realise slavery is alive and well and that the role of the Church clothed in the Christ Paul is talking about is called to play a role in that. To bring healing, to empower change, to make it possible for people who are roaming the valley of death, in chains and full of despair, to find a way out into a place where slavery has been well and truly abolished for all God's children.

Reading the papers these last couple of weeks misogyny and violence against women has been omnipresent. There is still a big difference between being born male or being born female. Here and in other parts of the world. Inside the Church as much as outside it. We are still not the community clothed in Christ where those distinctions have completely disappeared. But we are called to believe they can disappear.

Talking to colleagues from other ethnic and faith backgrounds, it is clear to me that the distinctions between Jew and Greek, Anglo and non-Anglo, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and other religious persuasions are still throwing up barriers that make dialogue difficult and living together a precarious undertaking. Interfaith dialogue and multiculturalism may be at the top of our agenda, but as Christians we are still as guilty of prejudice and the maintaining of barriers as people are outside our Church. It should not be like that with us. The "others" are children of God, no matter what colour or creed they've happened to end up in and we should be people who accept them as that.

And, on the Anniversary of Church Union we'll of course have to ask the question, what about inside the Uniting Church? Even after thirty years we still remember slight colour differences of the cloth of Christ we are wearing instead of cheerfully mixing and matching. We still find it difficult to accept, and put into practice, that in Christ there is no Methodist or Presbyterian, no Congregationalist, no Netherlands Reformed, no Baptist or whatever other brand of Christianity we may call our own. And even locally we hold on to irreconcilable distinctions between one congregation and another, between one building, one way of worshipping, one way of "doing Church" and another.

Something the Gerasene demoniac and Paul both call us to work on. With the failures and successes of the past, from Augustine till now, to learn from. To lay down the legion that keeps us captive in an earlier life, in fear of change and insecurity, and take on the new life Christ offers us, wide open and hospitable, ready to witness and live another life in the world, towards another world. Amen.