

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

14th October 2018

Genesis 37:2-36

Spirit... may we hear your invitation... to find you in a different place... beyond what is usual... or familiar... or expected... and in that new place... may we know ourselves... anew... and the world... more... Amen

I have my own personal fashion advisors... There are two of them... I live with them both... and they have a limited amount of trust in me to turn myself out each morning... I find it quite easy... I only have white shirts... three pairs of trousers... and a wide selection of ties... all of which have been bought in the past by said advisors... so I wake up in the morning... in complete confidence... I won't be making a fashion faux pa... or so you would think...

It is done silently... subtly almost... which doesn't always work on me... but just the raising of an eyebrow... or a slight hesitation... and I know the particular tie... that I chose simply... because it was sitting at the top of the pile... and the jersey that was closest to me in the wardrobe... apparently don't go... Who knew?... This wasn't part of my theological training...

Sunday is the most successful day... mainly because I wear this cassock... The reason for wearing it... is its function... to hide not just what you wear... but everything that might distract the listener from hearing the Word of God... It is there to almost hide the person... and focus on the words of faith...

The Geneva preaching gown that might be worn... and the degree hood to go with it... are garments of office... symbols of achievement... that this person is licensed to preach and has a degree... but you can argue these things go against the idea of what ministry is... personal achievements or even achievements the church requires... while important... ought not to be displayed... as a badge of honour... or authority... that sets someone apart...

Which is where Joseph and his dad... clashed with his brothers... Clothing rarely makes an appearance in the Bible... In fact... there is very little detail in the Bible of any garments... or robes... or appearance... even landscape... that would distract the reader

from the point of the story... Indeed... it is utterly irrelevant... and where robes of any kind are mentioned... it is usually to sit against... what the story is trying to say... The Bible is like radio... you have to listen and use your imagination because the details... unlike television... are not given... so when they are... it is making a point... and not a usually a positive one...

Rarely will you hear of anyone wearing anything special... There are some notable exceptions... but those are given to illustrate the point even more clearly... that while wearing a robe is a sign of power... faith is about ethics... When appearances are mentioned... the point is not about outward appearance but about inwardness... not about position or office... but about character...

So it makes you listen all the more when robes are donned... indeed twice in Joseph... the first being a gift from his father... that sets him apart from his brothers... Joseph a superior because of the long sleeves... and his brothers the shepherds... short sleeves and under the responsibility of Joseph... the clothing brings a position with it...

The other time in Joseph is when he is made prime minister of Egypt... a story we'll hear next week... where Pharaoh presents him with a ring of office... and robes of fine linen... and a gold chain... robes being about power...

These details are unusual... Indeed so unusual the whole story has become one of our culture's popular stories... the technicoloured dream coat... as if this was a good thing...

But the whole point of mentioning them is to say... this is NOT a good thing... What the story is saying is... this is how the REST of the world does things... Robes, rings, chains of office... multicoloured coats... these are external signs of glory... and not worthy of a people who judge authority... by humility... who recognise majesty... in servanthood... who see the redeemer... in the one who washes feet...

Some have even suggested... that both Pharaoh of Egypt... and another Biblical character Xerxes of Persia... enthuse about visual accessories of office... but they are also the first to issue decrees of genocide against the Jewish people... "A culture that worships external symbols of power"... says Jonathan Sacks... "will in the end... lack the inwardness and humanity... to respect the dignity of the powerless"...

If you are focused on the robes... you cannot see the naked...

But what is perhaps interesting also... is that in Joseph's story... garments are used to deceive...

The brothers spoil Joseph's coat by killing a goat and soaking it in blood... to persuade their father that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal... Potiphar's wife... takes the robe Joseph had been wearing but threw off in his hasty exit from her approaches... as evidence he tried to rape her... And as prime minister... Joseph hides his identity... behind the robes of office Pharaoh gives him...

And to make it all the more clear that God has shaped a faith NOT based on power but humility... and majesty found in servanthood... and redemption... in washing another's feet... the word for "garment" in Hebrew... also means "betrayal"...

And the first time we come across that in the Bible is where?... The first few pages... The first couple don garments of fig leaves... because they have eaten fruit from the forbidden tree... against God's instructions... They act innocently... but God's first question is... why are you wearing clothes... The garments betray them...

Subtly written throughout the story of faith... is this attitude that that which sets you apart from others... that lauds power over others... does not direct you to that which is the faith... Indeed such symbols of power... betray the whole dream of God... the respect of the least... the humility that enables you to serve those who have nothing...

The Joseph story builds from that first cloak... that sets him apart... The failings of that false power... haunt him all the way through his life... ironically bringing him into office of prime minister... but it is only in the end... when Joseph finally finds himself able to serve his brothers again... that redemption is found... The prime minister of the wealthiest nation on the planet... finally breaks and serves his brothers...

The garments... mean nothing... the office... is redundant... the power... is shallow... and the deceit is revealed... in a Joseph hiding behind his robes of office... and a band of brothers

who honestly thought their brother was dead... at their hands... the bible reveals all the players as they really are... without the trappings... broken... hungry... lost...

And all that is left... all that can restore them... is humility... the serving of others... the respect of others... and the humanity that... sees each other... as God sees them... without adornments... or symbols of authority... but as humans who need each other...

The Bible truly is a book... that challenges our world... and our church... and calls out the deception... and speaks of a faith... that is to restore the balance of our humanity... reminding us... what we cling to to set us apart from one another... be that power or wealth or authority... is utterly irrelevant... and reveals quietly... what makes any of us important... impressive... or powerful... is found in sharing service... humility... compassion... and love... towards the least of us...