

Trinity XX Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

I've been kicked out of quite a few joints! Sometimes I never even got in the door or to a seat, because I didn't have a tie on, or a jacket, or a reservation. And while not bound hand and foot, more than once I've been made to leave in the middle of a meal, booted out of a fast-food joint for teenage behaviour.

The days of dress codes seem all but gone. Semi-formal now means "no jeans," not "black tie optional." In many ways, this is liberating. We put less emphasis on dressing up for events, there is less pressure to conform to arbitrary standards, and in Church, especially, there is less stress on dress. Someone in a congregation tells a great story, about how they stopped wearing a hat to Church, when they overheard some unkind comments and sniping from fellow parishioners, about two young women who dared to show up hatless. The gossipers couldn't give thanks, that in an age of declining

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attendance, the girls were there, at least. Now the fact is, that still in much of the Christian world, women would not be welcome to worship without a hat.

We all probably welcome the relaxing of so many dress codes, but we all also have our limits. For me, it is men wearing hats in restaurants. The self-righteous part, and it's a large part, in me, wants to cry out, "Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

It does seem like a drastic response to an error in reading the fine print on an invitation, or to an etiquette blunder, to so boldly and publicly exclude and condemn this fellow, just for not being appropriately dressed.

This is a hard saying of Jesus, this ending to the parable. And for two thousand years Christians have wondered, "What is this

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wedding garment? What is the dress code for heaven? What is the one thing you have to have on, to stay at the heavenly banquet?”

In this second half of the Trinity Season, 13 to 26, the emphasis of our Communion Readings has been upon our living the Christian life, our following Jesus Christ. That means leaving some things behind, and many of our earlier readings were concerned with that, too. But now we turn to actively following Jesus - and what that means.

So, if you want to look in your Prayer Book Bible readings, turn to page 237. On Trinity 13, the Epistle tells us to walk in the Spirit, and the Gospel tells of the walk of the Good Samaritan. On Trinity 14, p. 239, again the Epistle is about walking in the Spirit, and the Gospel tells of the walk of the one grateful healed leper back to Jesus to give him thanks. On Trinity 15, p. 241, the Epistle speaks of those who walk according to this rule, which is the centrality of the cross. On Trinity 17, p. 244, Saint Paul calls us to walk worthy of

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our vocation with lowliness, and the Gospel tells us to walk humbly. On Trinity 19, p. 249, we hear “Walk not as other Gentiles walk” and the Gospel is Jesus telling someone already forgiven, “Arise and walk.”

The Church, then, would have us think about our walk. And today, once again, what do we hear? “See then that ye walk circumspectly,” that is, be careful about how you walk and live. Don’t be foolish, because it matters. That context may help us think about the real question, which is: “What is the Wedding Garment?”

In that parable of our Lord, there are two refusals. Some refuse the invitation. They make light of it, they are simply too busy, too pre-occupied or self-occupied. So the King invites others. In fact, it sounds a lot like everyone becomes invited, when the king says, “as many as ye shall find bid to the marriage”. This is the Great Commission, to invite all to share in the kingdom of heaven. And the invitation is extended to all, both bad and good. That is such an

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important point. Note that at the wedding banquet, there were guests, both bad and good! Now, we would expect the King to come in and separate the bad from the good. But no, he distinguishes between the well dressed and the under-dressed. The one man, who is ejected, is not sent away because he was bad, but only because he was not dressed for a wedding.

So we ask some questions. What can this wedding garment be? Is Jesus telling us that you cannot get into heaven without a tuxedo? What is this one necessary thing, if it is not a matter of being good instead of bad? The mention of a robe may make us think of the robes of the saints in heaven, which have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. But we need to remember, that everyone at that feast had accepted the king's invitation. The issue is not entrance into the king's banquet, but getting to stay. So what was lacking in this fellow, in the underdressed?

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Now before we start pitying this fictional man, let's be clear on what Jesus is and isn't saying. The issue is not the man's inability to afford a suit, or the fact that he had nothing appropriate to put on. It is, rather, his refusal to get changed for the wedding which is the point. This is the second refusal, his refusal to get changed.

I remember attending a school friend's Bar Mitzvah. I was understandably nervous about being in the strange environment of a synagogue. Fortunately I had been once before for a tour led by the Rabbi, and I knew where to pick up the yamulkes - the soft cap men and boys were expected to wear - in the back. Now, had I refused to put one on, it would have caused great offence, and perhaps in this conservative synagogue, it would have resulted in my ejection. So in the parable, it is the fellow's refusal to get changed, to dress for the wedding, which is his offence and fault. And that is a most helpful way, for us especially, to think about the parable. He refused to change, or to be changed, and for that he was cast out.

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Ralph Heighton, the first of my Wardens that I ever buried, was a gem of a humble, quiet and stubborn man. I recall when his daughter had arranged for the inside of the Church to be painted in the exact same colours as before, he complained that he preferred the older paint. My predecessor once told me with a smile and admiration, “Ralph Heighton is against all change, even for the better.” And that can be exactly the problem with Anglicans, especially theologically and liturgically conservative Anglicans. Change, those who claim to be for and those against change in the Church, use the petty and not-so-petty but often nasty politics of the Church, to deflect attention from the real need and locus of change, which is the human heart and mind, and the lives of men and women. Anglicans have fiddled with changing or not changing the furniture and the books, all the while neglecting to change their hearts and minds.

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The Gospel, and it is the Gospel today and always, is the gracious invitation of God to all, to share in the joy of his Son Jesus Christ. But it is also the invitation to change, to repentance and conversion, or rather the invitation to be changed.

Hop in your car, come as you are, to A&W! That may be a good fast food jingle. But while in Christ we do invite people to come as they are, you cannot remain that way. We are to be transformed, changed into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are to be renewed in the image and likeness of our Creator, in true righteousness and holiness. This is the point of that parable, that you and I need to hear loud and clear. Everyone is invited to the banquet, but you must get changed if you want to stay.

And yet, I haven't given you a clear answer as to what the wedding garment is, have I? If Jesus wanted that to be clear, he would have made it so, and I do think the point is rather, the change

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which was refused by that one man in the parable. Some refused the invitation. This man accepted the invitation, but then he refused to get changed.

But I can suggest, in light of today's readings, a particular way in which we might think of that garment, of the dress code of heaven. Isaiah prophesies, in chapter 61, of how the Messiah will give us the garment of praise, instead of the spirit of heaviness. And St. Peter tells us to be clothed with humility.

You will notice these two very points made in our Epistle. St. Paul speaks about making melody in our hearts to the Lord, giving thanks always, for all things, unto God. That sounds a lot like the garment of praise. The one fellow in the parable did not dress himself to enjoy the banquet. This joy and cheerfulness is exactly what I look for in dinner companions. Who wants to sit at a banquet with a sourpuss? Imagine spending eternity, seated at table in God's banquet hall beside a whiner! That's not heaven, that's hell, and

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I've been there. No, the joy of the Lord is your strength. So our Collect today speaks of cheerfully accomplishing those things that God would have done. It is not enough just to do what God wants. He asks - he demands - that we do it cheerfully. God wants cheerful guests, no party poopers. God loves, remember, a cheerful giver. And he is, at best, indifferent about the begrudging, griping giver.

This joy and cheerfulness, this garment of praise, is matched in the Epistle by a call to happily submit to one another. The refusal of the man in the parable to get changed, was also a refusal to approach the banquet with the other guests, in the uniform of joy and humility. Now, if we recognize that we may not be wearing cheerfulness, that we are not clothed with the garment of praise and humility, how are we to put this on? Where can we get it?

Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven. The Gospel makes us cheerful, the good news of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus

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Christ, who died for you and me. That is the gospel that lifts up our hearts, and fills us with endless praise, gratitude and joy. Amen.