

Pentecost

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[0 : 00] In a few minutes after the baptisms, those of us that are going to be getting in the water will be getting changed. We'll be taking off soggy clothes and putting on some dry ones.

And it reminds me of the many different images that are used in the New Testament to describe baptism and what it is, what it represents, what it stands for, is that image of getting changed. There's a pair of phrases that Paul uses time and time again to take off the old and put on the new. That is one of the many things that is expressed through baptism. Let me read to you just a few verses, or just two verses actually, from Ephesians chapter 4. It's about taking off the old and putting on the new.

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever turned up to a situation and you've been dressed inappropriately? Either you've just completely misread the situation and you've been the only one in a suit and everyone else has been in jeans, or it's been the other way around. It's a really embarrassing one, isn't it?

[1 : 35] I'm going to share with you a story that is actually true, and I think I probably would rate it as the most embarrassing situation of my life so far.

And it was when I was a student. It was my first week as a fresher at university. And I didn't know anybody. My mum and dad had dropped me off. They'd gone home, and I was talking to someone else, and they said, have you thought about entering the Miss Westminster College contest? I said, sorry, did you say Miss? They said, yeah. I said, they said, yeah, yeah, no, it's for the guys. You dress up in women's clothes, and you walk along this platform. It's on Saturday night, so you've got a week to get ready, and people vote on who's considered to be the beauty queen of Westminster College. I thought, I don't know anyone. Here's a good chance to get to know a few people.

So I entered. So I'm going to confess that I spent the first week of my life as a student on a mission to find a girl the same sort of size as me from whom I could borrow a dress.

[2 : 51] And so I had some interesting conversations because I had to somehow, I mean, nobody knew each other, so everybody that I spoke to, it was a, you know, hi, what's your name? Hi, I'm Russell. Yeah, yeah, so where are you from?

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm here. I'm a theology student. And at some point in the conversation, trying to introduce it naturally, could I borrow your clothes this weekend? Well, eventually I did manage to find a really nice dress.

It fitted really well. And I needed some tights, and I thought, I can't ask to borrow those. So I'll buy some. So I went in and bought the biggest pair of tights that I could find.

And it was the, the weekend eventually came round, and the actual event was in the evening. In the afternoon, I thought, I just better check that these tights do fit me.

So I put them on. It took me a little while, but I eventually got them on. So I was standing there in front of the mirror, and I had tights up to here, and I don't know what, but normal clothes for me, a jumper down to here.

[4 : 00] I could hear people around, and I thought it would be good fun to, there's a guy who I'd just met called Richard, who was just down the corridor from me. I thought it would be good fun to make him laugh.

And I noticed I'd actually had a little ladder in my tights. So I thought what I'd do is I'd tiptoe down the corridor, burst in on him, and say, Richard, I've laddered my tights. So I did.

So slowly, tiptoed along the corridor, knocked on the door, and got ready to burst in and shout, Richard, I've laddered my tights. Now, there's something else I need to tell you before I finish this story.

In that Richard was in his final year, I was in my first year. I'd been there a week already for Freshers Week. Richard had just arrived, along with everyone else in his year, who were being dropped off by their parents.

The other thing I need to tell you is that Richard's dad was a bishop. So I tapped on the door, I burst in, and I say, Richard, I've laddered my tights.

[5 : 06] Only Richard wasn't there. But his mum and dad, and his girlfriend's mum and dad, were. Now, over the years, I've learnt to, partly because I'm a minister, and partly because as you get older, I've got used to filtering my thoughts, and I've learnt to process things before I verbalise them.

But I was only 18 years old on this occasion, so I said the first thing that came into my head, as I made a feeble attempt to try to redeem the situation and turn it into what might seem like a normal conversation.

So they looked at me and my tights, and I looked at them, and I said, with a straight face, oh, you haven't seen Richard, have you?

And they didn't say anything. They just went... So I said, well, if you see him, let me know, and walked out. Turning up inappropriately dressed isn't good.

And there's a famous quotation, and it's attributed to various different people, Sir Ranulf Fiennes, Sir Alfred Wainwright, even, I've read, Billy Connolly was supposed to have come out.

[6 : 28] I don't know who said it originally, it doesn't really matter. But the quote is this, there's no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing. And the New Testament calls us to consider the way that we are dressed, in a metaphorical sense.

In a spiritual sense. And when Paul says, symbolised in baptism, but it's a challenge that runs for us every single day of our lives, that being a disciple of Jesus is about taking off the new, so it's taking off the old, and putting on the new, it challenges us to the core, as to what does it mean to be dressed spiritually?

Are we appropriately dressed spiritually? What does it mean for us to take off the old, and to put on the new? Well, let's just take a couple of minutes to think about what that might mean. Firstly, Paul says, that if you are a disciple of Jesus, we need to get into the business of taking off the old.

You know, that's a really powerful image, because as we go through our lives, we almost unwittingly end up putting on stuff, spiritual stuff I'm talking now, without noticing.

We accumulate things. For example, we begin to accumulate masks. Our habits and our behaviour is such that we don't even realise the way that we interact with others.

[7 : 52] We wear masks, we project an image that is not the real self. And a question, as we hear these words from Paul, for us to ask ourselves, is do we wear a false mask that really needs to come off?

A mask that is a projection, but is not the true self. Another thing that we can accumulate, almost unwittingly, is a sense of resentment.

Something can happen, perhaps years ago, and we've never quite let go of it. It becomes a grudge. It becomes part of us, to the point that we don't even recognise its presence.

But we can pick up those resentments, and they brew away, and they stew away in us. And as we get older, and we become more and more cynical, we can almost feel relaxed about our cynicism, and our attitudes, and we justify them, and even make a virtue out of them.

I saw somebody a while ago that had a t-shirt on, and it said, I'm not cynical, I'm just experienced. So we can pick up masks, we can pick up resentments, and grudges, but our attitudes themselves, over time, can be desensitised.

[9 : 04] Things that when we were younger, we felt were true and real, that perhaps we might now just look at as ideals of being young. But actually, things that we become desensitised, and we become accustomed to, we end up putting these things on, and we're not even aware that they're there.

Tony Campolo, is a Pentecostal minister, and a very well-known Christian speaker. He was quite famous for a moment, this was going back sometime, probably about 30 years ago now, at a massive Christian conference.

I think it might have been Spring Harvest, something like that. But he was standing at the platform before thousands and thousands of Christians, giving a talk about the Bible.

And he was talking about social justice, and the way that our consciences become eroded. And famously, he stood up in front of these, it's a huge gathering of Christians, and he said to them,

today I want to say to you three things.

The first is that while we were sleeping last night, approximately 30,000 children globally would have died of either starvation or malnutrition-related disease.

[10:21] The second thing I want to tell you is that as you sit here listening to this as a Christian, frankly, you couldn't give an SH1T, except he didn't spell it, he said the word at a Christian conference.

He said the third thing I want to say to you is I want to put to you as a question. Were you more shocked by the statistic or because you heard me say a four-letter swear word?

You see, we're not shocked by those things anymore, by those statistics, not because we don't care, but because we just get used to it.

You know, I had my bike serviced a while ago, and one of the things they did to it was they put some new brakes on it, some new cables. I rode it away, and the first moment that I just put the gentlest tap on the brake, boom!

I couldn't believe what had happened. You see, all this time I've been riding around, and those brakes, those old brakes, had very gradually, gradually worn away. And when it happens gradually, you don't notice it.

[11:31] You don't. Something similar, I suggest, happens to us in our attitudes. And the danger is, is that the longer we've been around, the more those attitudes build up on us and around us.

The clothes we accumulate, that we're walking around wearing, and we don't even know. And Paul says, that stuff, you need to take it off. And it's not just a once-in-a-moment thing that happens at baptism.

It is expressed in baptism, but it's a daily challenge for us. Why is it daily? It has to be. Because if we don't keep an eye on ourselves, if we don't keep things in check, these things can build up.

It's a daily challenge to throw off the old, and to put on the new. So what is putting on the new?

What might it mean? You know, sometimes people who are new to Christian faith, will say, you know, so much of this Christianity stuff, seems frankly, well, weird.

It seems strange. And you know, I'd say, yeah, of course it does. It should do. It's because it is weird, and it is strange, when our definition of normality is the world that we've become accustomed to.

[12:43] When we get used to those kind of statistics, when we get used to the norms around us, then yes, the message of the gospel is strange. The gospel is about how this world can be changed, and will be changed, Jesus referred to that throughout his teaching as the kingdom of God.

Putting on the new means getting ready for that which is coming, and which Jesus is going to bring about in his kingdom. So, many things may seem weird to our ears at first, but it's because they are the things of the kingdom that are contrary to what wider culture would say to us.

So, the call to give radically of our time and money is something that we do, not because it's just a kind thing to do, but because that's how it is going to be from now on.

We are getting ready for the kingdom in which we will be completely and utterly dependent on God throughout, and it will be an amazing relationship. Daring to speak out, and to challenge the status quo.

It's not because we're activists, although there's nothing wrong with being an activist, but it's because we are about the business of anticipating a radical newness when God's kingdom comes.

[13:59] You know, when we dare to live by faith and dream in hope in the face of what the world, of what would seem to be apparently hopeless circumstances, it's not because we're under some illusion, but because we take seriously the Bible's call to believe that God is on the move and the best is yet to come.

When the Bible presents us with a vision of how we are to flourish as human beings, as sexual beings, whether that be in our marriage or in our singleness, it is, and it is contrary to the views of secular society, it's not because it's out of date or out of touch, but it's because it looks ahead to the kingdom of God in which we will all flourish forever and ever.

When we refuse to be crushed by anxiety or depression, even though we feel its haunting cloud looming, it's not just through personal resolve, but it's by knowing that God's promises are to be trusted and that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.

When we sense that grief and despair could overwhelm us, but we lay hold instead of that peace that is deep within, that peace that comes from God alone, it's not because we're just optimistic, but it's because that we believe that some 2,000 years ago, one man actually did walk away from his grave.

See, the call to follow Jesus, the call to cast off the old and to put on the new, even though it is one that may seem strange, but we should expect it to seem strange in our culture.

[15 : 45] And because it seems strange, it doesn't always fit comfortably at first. And it's not just at first, but it's throughout our lives.

And being a disciple of Jesus, taking this stuff seriously, means that there will be stuff that we will be confronted by in God's word that doesn't always sit comfortably with how we feel.

But we are called, if we are serious about this, about pulling on the new, about putting on stuff that doesn't fit comfortably, but we grow into. I always chuckle around about September time, whenever it's either just before or at the end of school time.

And across this town, you see lots of kids going off to school, to the secondary school, but you can always spot the New Year sevens, not just because of their size, but because of their blazers.

They usually come down to the knee and there's little fingertips poking out the end of those sleeves as these great big blazers are hanging off them, blazers that eventually they will grow into.

[16 : 59] And I offer that to all of us as an image, as we come to pray now and as we move to this time of baptism. Because it doesn't matter how old or how young we are, whether you've been a Christian for decades, or whether it's brand new to you.

Faith is something that we're called to put on every day, to grow into. And whatever stage we are at, there will always, in this life, this side of eternity, be that stuff that doesn't seem to fit quite right.

It's not because it's not right, it's because we're not right. But God invites us to grow. And that's what's so exciting about being a Christian, is you cannot outgrow God.

Because he has his kingdom promises ahead of us that will always be bigger and more wonderful than anything else you can experience in this world. But he calls us now, every day of our lives, to get into this habit of putting on the new stuff in anticipation of that which is coming.