How did you get in here without a wedding robe?

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Pentecost + 20 A – *Ex 32 1-14; Mt 22 1-14; Phil 4 1-9*

How did you get in here without a wedding robe? The day after the vote for the Voice.

In the Middle East, it's really important for a guest to show respect to their host by dressing properly. I found that out the hard way early in 1996 when we returned to Jerusalem. Vicky and I were invited to a gathering of people connected with the Anglican cathedral. Bishop Samir, in his huge voice, greeted me and told me off for not wearing a clergy shirt: ***'Are you ashamed to wear it outside a church?'*** You don't forget a question like that. The parable we just heard always vividly brings that moment back for me; ***'… how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'***

This is the last of three parables Jesus told in the Temple to answer the high priests and elders leaders who'd challenged his authority. It finished with a guest who, like me, wasn't appropriately dressed, and who *did* get thrown out. This guest was one of the people from the streets invited into the banquet. The king had already seen his son insulted by his earlier invited guests' refusal to come. Now he's had his servants invite anyone they can find on the streets to fill the banqueting table.

So this missing wedding garment; what might it represent? There've been many theories over the centuries – various communities interpret its meaning differently for themselves. But the common thread has always been that somehow the garment shows your true relationship with God.

My experience with Bishop Samir and the missing clergy shirt helps me see this. I was newly returned to Jerusalem after eight years away. The other guests, members of the cathedral's local Palestinian congregation, couldn't know how I fitted in. I could've been a tourist accidentally blundering into a church function. But a clergy shirt would immediately have spelt out my relationship with Bishop Samir and with everyone else there. The Bishop solved the mystery by identifying me in his huge voice. It was embarrassing, but kinder than sending me home to dress properly.

So for me, '*wearing the wedding garment*' challenges me to acknowledge openly my relationship with God. I should publicly acknowledge the honour of God's invitation to me. But what might *wearing the garment* say to others?

For the chief priests and elders, this parable confronts them with Israel's neglect of their relationship with God; their refusal to recognise Jesus.

Jesus shows through this parable what it means that Israel wouldn't *wear the garment*.

For Matthew's community, *wearing the garment* meant solidarity with Jesus; in the face of persecution, being prepared to wear the cost of their integrity for him just as he had done for them.

For one early church, we heard Paul say how he expected people to live out *wearing the garment.* The church he founded in Philippi was the first Christian community on European soil. Squabbles between two of the community leaders threatened the health of the community. We know how very dangerous that is.

Writing from prison, Paul's advice was to *[4] Rejoice in the Lord … [5] Let your gentleness be known to everyone … [6] Don't worry … pray … give thanks … [8] think about whatever's true, whatever's honourable, whatever's just, whatever's pure, whatever's*

pleasing, whatever's commendable, if there's any excellence and if there's anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

In this time of hurt and division – the pain suffered by Aboriginal people in this land – in this time of ghastly war crimes in so many places, of cascading natural and artificially created disasters, in such times, a community that can rise above blame and bitterness can be a haven of peace and hope; a lighthouse in a gale. It's clearly needed right now. Imagine the last weeks and months if people'd been as kind as Paul suggests.

So is this what today's parable says to us about our path – what our *wearing the garment* might be in our place and time; our role in such a world environment?

It's not straightforward being that haven of peace and hope; that lighthouse in the shadows. The end of the first part of the parable, where everyone's invited in from the streets, *seems* to say come as you are; you're *fine* as you are. The invitation to all on the streets is generous; broad. But *wearing the robe* says it's not an invitation to a come as you are party. It doesn't pretend we're fine just the way we are. We're not. We're *out on the streets* – many of us troubled, confused, lonely; many are sick; many in terrible distress. The invitation to the royal banquet implies a demand that we *wear a wedding robe*.

Former Lutheran then Catholic Leonard Klein writes, '*The Gospel is not the announcement that [we're] fine the way we are. Rather, God loves us so much that God will not leave us unchanged.*'

How do we let this happen to us?

Choosing to pray – come what may, to prioritise prayer – makes a palpable difference. And I don't just mean prayer as individuals. As a community, we are called to expose ourselves

to the possibility of being changed – and nothing exposes us to that possibility more powerfully than uniting in prayer together.

So let’s pray for this community to be a haven of peace, hope, healing and light to a country and a world where so many are suffering so cruelly. Amen