

Lent 1 2025: Clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness. Colossians 3. 12-15

When I was a bairn, growing up in South Shields, at the beginning of the School Easter holidays, my mother would announce – ‘David, Lorraine, were going into town to buy your Easter clothes’. Because back then there was a widespread tradition that you bought new best clothes to wear on Easter Sunday. Well, like many traditions, its now a fading memory. But there is something deeply Christian about Easter and new clothes.

Today we begin a Lent sermon series based on St Paul’s Letter to the Colossians chapter 3. Unusually, we will read the same short section of Colossians over the next five weeks. So, this text will accompany us through most of Lent. And we will look at a list of virtues that St Paul includes as the new clothes we are invited to wear as Christians.

What distinguishes Christians? Well, its what we believe about God, about Jesus, but it’s also about how we seek to live. And here the word virtue is important – we seek to live virtuous lives which includes good things like uprightness, goodness, moral excellence, seeking to live justly. Why? Because we see in Jesus the supremely virtuous life and we try to follow and imitate him. So, this is about how our mind is formed; how we think and act and respond. And Lent is a good time to reflect on our own lives, individually and corporately as a Church. Are we people who seek to grow in virtue?

Let me put Colossians 3 in context. Colossae was a city in modern day Turkey, about 100 miles east of the great city of Ephesus. It was an important trade route, and wool and weaving were its main industries. So, clothes were important in Colossae. Paul wrote his letter about 55/56AD. Paul did not found the Church there but knew about it from his friend Epaphras who was from that city. In Chapter 3, Paul begins by reminding the Colossians of Easter – by faith, they have been *raised with Christ* – so they must seek the things that are above, where Christ reigns, not the things of earth. You see, there was much in the prevailing culture of the Roman Empire that was corrupt, immoral, and excessive. Before becoming Christians, many new members of the Church had to go through a radical change in how they behaved. Paul lists some of those vices – the opposite of virtues – immorality, impurity, greed, anger, malice, abusive language, to name some. But Paul reminds the Colossians of their baptism. And he uses clothes as an image. He said, ‘You have stripped off the old

self', the old nature, and all that went with it 'and you have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being formed in the image of God our creator'. Now many new converts to Christianity in the early church would be baptised in a river or lake or perhaps in a Roman cistern used to collect water. It seems that they would take off their old clothes, except for modesty's sake, and be washed in the water of baptism. They would then put on new clothes because they had become a new creation. The origin of this white robe that I'm wearing, called an alb, is a baptismal robe. It is to remind all of us that we are called to walk in the light and truth of Christ as those whose sins are forgiven and washed clean.

And so, we come to the passage we will be thinking of in Lent. Paul continues the clothing image. But he begins in verse 12 to remind the Colossians of their identity. They are *God's chosen, holy and beloved*. All of these words were said of Israel in the Old Testament. But through the coming of the Son of God, all those gifts are now available not only to Israel but to the Church. So, God in his mercy has *chosen you* to know and believe in Jesus. God has *set you apart* to live holy lives, obedient and Christ-like. And most wonderful God keeps on saying to you just how much he *loves you*, with all your foibles and contradictions, and lapses. To God, you are *beloved*. Lent is a good time to reclaim that truth for Lent leads us to the Cross where God's boundless love for each of us and the world knew no limits.

So, Paul continues 'Clothe yourselves...' You see, we can walk away from the waters of baptism with a bright shining alb – which is newly washed this week. But you know, walking around this stone Church, very quickly the bottom hem and the cuffs become grubby. We need to keep on renewing our baptism. And we will do that formally on Easter Sunday, but you know every time we confess our sins and then hear the words of God's forgiveness proclaimed in absolution, we are restored to our baptismal status and washed clean over again. And I want to say something that is so important for St Paul. In one sense, this washing, this making clean is *God's work*; it is God's grace working in our lives. But that doesn't mean we don't have a vital part to play. Hence, Paul can say, *Clothe yourselves*. And that is all about your *mind* and your *will*. Your will is the engine room of your Christian lives. *Take my will and make it thine*, we sing.

So, what are the first two virtues that Paul invites us to put as a new set of clothes?

First, Clothe yourself with *compassion*. The Greek text says literally, 'bowels of compassion'. This indicates that compassion is a strong word. Its far more than simply being sympathetic or feeling pity. Rather, it's something we feel in our guts, at the core of our being. Compassion is seeking, however imperfectly, to put ourselves into someone else's shoes. It means seeing and seeking to understand the pain someone is feeling, which often means listening, and seeking as far as we can to enter into that pain. Its never about fobbing someone off with a platitude, or dismissing or minimising what they are feeling in a kind of 'pull yourself together' attitude. And it is the very opposite to adding to someone's pain by the barbed remark or careless comment. Compassion is the deepest form of empathy – the English word compassion means literally *to suffer with*. The same word is used in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For whatever reason, the priest and Levite failed to show compassion. But the good Samaritan when he saw the man, stopped – he really saw him in his pain and need. And compassion drove him to do something about it. So, he tended his wounds, lifted him onto his donkey, took him to the inn and paid for his care. Now the needs we meet may not be so dramatic, but compassion is being so moved by the needs of another that we simply must try to respond. Clothe yourselves with compassion.

And secondly, clothe yourselves with kindness. And this word seems to have two aspects to it. The first is kind *actions*. These are practical things we do to show that we care. When we receive an act of kindness, it touches us because we see it as a loving gift. And it transforms relationships and strengthens friendships. The second sense is kind *attitudes*. Now the Greek word here is closely related to the idea of generosity of spirit. Kindness is trying to see the best in people, affirming their worth and recognising their goodness. It is the opposite of cynicism and mistrusting motives. When we clothe ourselves in kindness, we are looking for the positives, what will build up and not tear down, what will affirm and not simply trash. This is not saying that there will never be disagreements or differences of opinion. The test is how these are handled. Sadly, even the Church, the harsh comment, the knee-jerk email, the focussing only on the negative, can betray a lack of basic kindness.

So, this week, when you go to your wardrobe each morning and decide what to wear, put on these virtues as well: *Clothe yourselves with compassion; clothe yourselves with kindness.*