

## **What is a Christian to wear?**

The Rev. Karen Swanson

Have you ever felt embarrassed or awkward because you were wearing the wrong thing to an occasion? I still remember my panic when my wealthy aunt invited me to the swanky LA country club while I was in seminary. The clothes that I had brought for my visit to her home were the casual ones I wore in seminary, mostly jeans and T-shirts. A dress was needed, and I had none! Fortunately, one of my cousins found one that worked, and away we went.

In today's epistle, Paul speaks of himself as "an ambassador in chains." He was sitting in prison, guilty of being an ardent Christian, when he wrote this letter to the community in Ephesus. Probably, he was looking at a Roman soldier in all his regalia, and reflecting on what protective gear a Christian would need to wear in order to stand firm in his faith. The Roman way of life was peaceful on the surface, but rooted in violence and aggression. Ways of thinking or behaving that did not appear to support the power and supremacy of the emperor, were squelched by the society. So what did a Christian need to put on to stand fast in his faith in a world that could be hostile to it, and to him or her?

Before we go on to consider Paul's answer to that question, we might note that the position of a Christian in Ephesus has some

similarity to a Christian in America today. We also live in a society that is often violent, and less and less open to civil conversations about our differences. Fewer and fewer people identify with the Christian way. More and more often we who are Christians are called upon to defend our perspective to Christians of other kinds, to people of other faiths or no faith, and to people who have been hurt by institutional religion, and are hostile to the church and its members.

What are we to do? Paul would have us understand that our work is not to fight with people who are hostile or indifferent to the church, nor to be silenced by them. We are to pray to the Spirit for God's wisdom about when to listen and when to speak. We are to pray for the courage and strength to say what needs to be said in God's time. Our words might express our trust in a loving God, or our commitment to fairness, or our opposition to hurtful actions.

We are also called to clothe ourselves with the character of God. We proclaim God's presence when, with the Spirit's help, we are truthful in the presence of deceit, related where others are alienated, peaceful when others are violent, centered and whole when others are out of control, counting on God when others are giving up. Our Spirit-filled way of being in the world is a witness even when no words are spoken.

In order to be more like this, more often, we need to pray throughout the day, not just for ourselves, but also for one another. We need to pray for other members of this community by name, with respect to the challenges we and they face, especially living out our faith in a difficult world. Paul is clear, and I wholeheartedly agree: we need one another to grow in Christian strength and courage.

To be clothed in God's character, we also need to "abide" in God. We need to be serious about setting aside time for God in prayer. We need to receive God deep within ourselves, digest his words, and invite him to become one with us. We need to take Christ in spiritually each week just as we physically receive His essence in the Body and the Blood of Holy Communion.

The interim time in which we now live is a spiritual opportunity. It is an opportunity to recognize that our spiritual well-being depends primarily on God. It is an opportunity to experience the importance of the community of the church, and the ministry of the baptized. Particular priests help us recognize and experience God in special ways, and that is important. Many of you are grateful to Father Rob for things he has helped you see about yourself and God. Some of you are grateful to me for my insights or example. When your permanent rector is hired, and is on the scene, you will

rejoice in the gifts that he or she will bring to you. Some of you will see and receive those gifts sooner and more readily than others. As the mystery of God's graces in that person unfolds, you will continue to have the Spirit and one another as gifts to help you become more fully clothed in God's character, firmer in your faith, and wiser and more courageous in your ministries. I encourage you to embrace these gifts of community with one another and communion with God now and always.

In the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.