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The Robe at the Door

A homily for the commemoration of Charles Simeon, Priest, 1836
by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Vespers with Holy Eucharist
Delivered at Corso Residences, Atlanta, Georgia

The king throws a wedding feast for his son, and the invitations go out. The first guests have better things to do, one with his farm, another with his business. So the king sends his servants into the streets to gather everyone they can find, “both good and bad,” Matthew says, until the hall is full.

Then comes the moment that has troubled readers for two thousand years. The king walks among his guests and finds one man without a wedding robe. “Friend,” he says, “how did you get in here?” The man has nothing to say.

We have all been to weddings. Many of us have been to more than we can count: our own, our children’s, our grandchildren’s, our friends’ and then our friends’ children’s. We know what happens before a wedding. There is the question of what to wear. There is the dress pressed and hung on the back of the bedroom door the night before, so it is the first thing we see in the morning.

Scholars disagree about the robe in this parable. Some say a host in Jesus’ day might have provided garments for his guests, especially guests gathered in a hurry from the street. Others say there is no evidence for it. We can leave the question open, because the parable seems to work either way, and because the open question is itself instructive. Either way, the robe stands at the threshold of the feast, and everything depends on whether we put it on.

Here is how I hear it this morning. The people gathered from the streets had no time to go home and change, and many had no robe to change into. If they were wearing wedding clothes, someone gave them. The robe was waiting at the door, and the guests had only to receive it, let it be draped over their shoulders, and walk into the light.

The man who is speechless before the king is the one who came in as he was and stayed as he was. He accepted the invitation and declined the gift. He wanted the feast without being changed by it.

Charles Simeon knew about that robe. He came to faith in 1779 as a nineteen-year-old undergraduate at King’s College, Cambridge. The college required its students to receive Holy Communion, and Simeon, taking the requirement more seriously than most, was terrified. He knew he was not ready. He did not have the right clothes for the feast. For three months he tried to make himself worthy. He read, he fasted, he made himself ill with effort.

Then, in Holy Week, reading about the sacrifices of the Old Testament, he came across the old practice of laying one’s sins on the head of the offering. He saw that what he had been trying to sew for himself had already been given. On Easter morning he woke with the words “Jesus Christ is risen today” on his heart, and

he went to the Lord's table in joy. The robe had been at the door all along.

He spent the next fifty-four years as vicar of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge. The congregation did not want him. The pew-holders locked their pews, and for more than ten years he preached to people standing in the aisles. He kept preaching, and he kept visiting. Slowly, over decades, the church filled. Generations of Cambridge students sat under his preaching and went out across England and around the world.

Inside his pulpit, where only the preacher could see, Simeon had carved words from the Gospel of John: "Sir, we would see Jesus." That was his whole aim, to help people see the One who was already holding out the robe.

Now to Amos, who gives us a harder word this morning. "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion," he says, those lying on beds of ivory, drinking wine from bowls, anointing themselves with the finest oils, "but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."

The trouble in Amos is not that the people are comfortable. It is that their comfort has made them numb. They are dressed for the party, but the clothes are their own, and the clothes have become a kind of armor. Nothing outside the banquet hall reaches them anymore.

The collect for Simeon asks something different for us. It asks that we serve God "with a quiet and contented mind." This is not the ease of Amos. Contentment of this kind still grieves over the ruin of Joseph. It still notices the friend who has stopped coming, the grandchild who is struggling, the neighbor who is alone. It is quiet, but it is awake.

That is what the robe does. It does not insulate us. It clothes us in someone else's love, and that love makes us more tender to the world rather than less.

Many of us have reached the age when our closets hold more history than fashion. There is the dress from our daughter's wedding, the suit from the funeral, the sweater someone knitted for us decades ago. We have worn a great many clothes. Some we chose. Some were chosen for us. Some we grew into, and some we grew out of.

Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me." He does not say he earned it, or that he finally became worthy of it. He says it was given, to the least of the saints, and he spent his life telling others about "the boundless riches of Christ."

The robe is still being offered. It is offered at seventy and at eighty and at ninety as freely as it was offered to a frightened nineteen-year-old at Cambridge. We do not outgrow it. If anything, the years teach us how much we need it, and how little we can sew for ourselves.

So when we come to the table this morning, we come as Simeon finally came: not dressed in our own accomplishments or our own worries, but in the robe held out at the door. We let it be draped over our shoulders. And then we walk into the feast, where the king's son is waiting, and where there is room for everyone.

Amen.

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