

Dress code: Matthew 22:1-14

by [Gracia Grindal](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

If you are ever invited to a gala event where a constitutional monarch is present, you will be told to wear a dark suit or a formal dress. If you do not follow the dress code, you will be denied entry and sent back into the darkness from which you came. We're talking formal wear here, not the kind of outrageous display of extreme couture exemplified by Jennifer Lopez at the Academy Awards. Formal and discreet—no pants suits for women, no leisure suits for men. Apparently the poor guy in the parable of the wedding banquet didn't read the small print on his invitation. He is thrown into outer darkness where there will be gnashing of teeth because, as Jesus concludes, many are called but few are chosen. Jesus doesn't give us a clue about why this happens. Didn't the man wear the clothes he was given? Is he protesting the dress code? What is going on here?

As any mother knows, dressing another person can become a contest of wills. Scripture understands this—in fact, it is a profound theme of scripture from the beginning, when God dresses Adam and Eve in animal skins before they leave Eden, to the end, when we're all going to be wearing white robes in the new Jerusalem. God provides these clothes freely to those who need them. Scripture gives us several glimpses of what these clothes will be like. American metaphysical poet Edward Taylor uses the images of Revelation 7 in his poem "Huswifery."

Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,
Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory;
My Words and Actions, that their shine may fill
My wayes with glory and thee glorify.
Then mine apparel shall display before yee
That I am Clothed in Holy robes for glory.

Given the pervasiveness of the theme of clothes in scripture, it is not surprising that it appears frequently in Christian song. There is, of course, the Negro spiritual "I Got a Robe" and Bianco da Siena's "Come Down, O Love Divine," set by Ralph Vaughan Williams. This 15th-century hymn uses clothing in another way: "Let holy charity /

Mine outward vesture be, / And lowliness become mine inner clothing / True lowliness of heart, / Which takes the humbler part, / And o'er its own shortcoming weeps with loathing." Bianco concludes, "No soul can guess his grace / Till it become the place / Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling."

While we moderns might suggest that Bianco work on self-esteem issues, the images of an overcoat of charity and innerwear of lowliness of heart—the heart where the Holy Spirit also dwells—show how the will has to be changed thoroughly if we are to live in relationship with both neighbor and God. I'm struck by the wisdom of the image—the inner dress being fundamental, like the heart, while the outer clothing, charity, comes from a heart that knows it needs God in order to do anything good.

We are naked, both literally and metaphorically, before the living God. We need to be dressed, not with the sartorial choices of our own will, but with the grace of God. Scripture tells us that our own righteousness is as filthy rags, so we understand that only God has the appropriate wardrobe for us. Scripture tells us that the washing of the old garments comes from the blood of the Lamb. As Richard Crashaw, the great Baroque poet of England, wrote: "Th' have left Thee naked, Lord, O that they had; / This garment too I would they had denied. / Thee with Thyself they have too richly clad, / Opening the purple wardrobe of Thy side. / O never could be found garments too good / For Thee to wear, but these, of Thine own blood."

Christ's nakedness on the cross is part of his humiliation, but as the source of all good he dresses himself with his purple (royal) blood and defeats the heinous purposes of his murderers. We shudder at the metaphysical conceit about the blood, but we understand the clothing image. Only Christ can dress us up in purples. Naked we came into the world, and naked we go out.

As Shakespeare's King Lear raves on the heath, he begins to strip off his royal outerwear. "Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume . . . Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more, but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art." Lear strips all humanity naked with his words of terror and abandonment as he works to discover what it means to be a man, not a king.

In the hymn "The Farmer Takes a Sheaf of Grain," contemporary Swedish hymn writer Ylva Eggehorn gets it right:

The farmer takes a sheaf of grain, his harvest,
And lifts it up in gratitude to God.
So I will lift my daily work and troubles
And leave them, unadorned, before my God.

My faith bears nothing more, I bring no treasures
And come without adornment to your house.
My life is naked longing, flesh and blood.
So dress me in your grace. You are my God.

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