

Putting on new clothes

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

Hans Christian Andersen tells about an emperor who was so fond of new clothes that he spent all his money on them. Alas, the emperor was so committed to his clothes that he neglected to take care of his people's needs. Instead, he spent all his time in his dressing room, admiring his garments.

One day two swindlers came and claimed they were weavers who could weave the "finest cloth imaginable." Their colors and patterns, they said, were exceptionally beautiful, and the clothes possessed a wonderful quality--they were invisible to any man who was unfit for his office, or who was hopelessly stupid.

The emperor was impressed at the prospect of finding out which people in the empire were unfit for their posts, as well as telling the clever from the stupid. So he gave the men large amounts of money. The men pocketed the money and pretended to be weaving cloth.

Eventually, the emperor became curious about the progress on the clothes, and decided to send his "honest old minister" to the weavers. The emperor was sure that the minister's unquestionable intelligence and fitness for office would make him a good emissary. But the minister could not see the cloth. He began to question his own intelligence and fitness for office, and decided not to tell anyone that he had been unable to see the material.

Instead, he announced that the cloth "is very pretty--quite enchanting! . . . What a pattern, and what colors! I shall tell the emperor that I am very much pleased with it." Eventually the emperor himself went to see how the clothes were coming. What a shock when he realized that he saw nothing at all! But he did not want to admit that he was stupid or unfit to be emperor, so he announced that the cloth was very beautiful, and all the courtiers rapidly agreed.

The next day, the emperor took part in a great procession, and everyone pretended that they saw his new clothes. No one wanted to be shown to be unfit for his office or too stupid. But then a child spoke up.

"But he has nothing on at all," the child said. The people whispered to each other. "The child said he has nothing on!" "He has nothing on at all!" cried all the people at last. And the emperor too was worried, for it seemed to him that they were right. But he thought to himself, "I must go through with the procession." And he continued in the procession, wearing nothing at all.

Another great storyteller, Jesus of Nazareth, said, "Except as you become a little child . . ." It was, after all, a child who was the only one with the courage to speak the truth about the emperor's (lack of) new clothes. Except for the witness of that child, everyone in the city was willing to live in a world of deception and lies. Everyone was captured by fear--fear of the powerful, fear caused by the grip of sin. Even after the child names the truth, the people and the emperor do not have the resources to know how to change their way of life. And so the emperor continues with the charade.

The emperor's new clothes allowed him, and others around him, to pretend to see something that wasn't there. By contrast, the clothes that Christians put on in baptism (see Galatians 3:27) invite us, and others around us, to see that which really is there--to become truthful with ourselves and one another in fidelity to God.

But what happens when we clothe ourselves with Christ? Does the transformation occur overnight, as if by some magic wand? Or does it begin a process of being initiated into habits and practices of a way of life, an initiation in which we become apprentices to those who have gone before us?

In the early church, entry into the Christian community was marked by an apprenticeship guided by sponsors. At the time of baptism on Easter, new Christians signified the power of their turning from a world of sin and deception to a life clothed in Christ. Unlike the emperor's new clothes, the apprentice's new clothes were a sign of commitment to see what really is there in the world--in praise and penitence.

Jesus' announcement and enactment of God's inbreaking reign calls disciples then and now into a new community marked by forgiveness and repentance. In so doing, God is shaping a truthful community capable of radical discipleship and witness in the world.

The story of the emperor's new clothes reminds us that the issue we face is not whether we will be apprentices or not. We are apprentices who are influenced by others, for good or for ill. In the world of the emperor, we are shaped by sin and

deception. Whether we are swindlers who deceive others for the sake of our own gain, or townspeople so concerned about appearances that we are unwilling and even unable to discern the truth, we become chained to habits of sin and being sinned against. Our lives become marked by fear.

The real issue is whether we are willing to don the apprentice's new clothes, and to struggle to bear witness with one another to the truthful and life-giving character of God's inbreaking reign. In so doing, we learn to "be not afraid" as we find a sense of new life. But that will also require that we recover the importance of shaping our own and one another's lives in habits and practices that enable us to unlearn the world of emperors and to learn to see the world as apprentices to the true Master.