

“Baptism Clothes”

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Farnham and St. John’s Episcopal Churches

Sunday, August 5, 2018, St. John’s (Warsaw) – The Rev. Torrence Harman

Ephesians 4:1-16; Psalm 51; John 6:24-35

Cian John Partlow is here this morning because of a piece of clothing. He and his family are here in this almost two-hundred- year old sanctuary with you who have never met him before not just because he is to be baptized and it had to happen on some date in some church, but here on this date in this church because of what he has on.

Now, there is a “back” story to this. It is a story kind of like a parable. It has deeper meaning than what it seems at first telling. And, the story is really the message this morning.

Cian’s grandmother called me a few weeks ago. The gist of the call: “Our grandson is to be baptized. Can you do it?” I knew these grandparents as members of Grace, Kilmarnock. “Why, I wondered, were they calling me?” The story unfolded: because the Grace or former Grace church clergy” were not available at the moment. The rector had left, called to a church in Richmond. The current associate rector was on her extended honeymoon. The former associate rector was having surgery. “And then,” the grandmother continued: “I remembered that we knew you, Torrence, and that we had attended Farnham/St. John’s a few times when Peter Hogge was there as Interim because he had been our rector where we used to live before we moved to the Northern Neck.” She breathlessly concluded. “So, can you baptize Cian in early August?”

I paused, thinking, “People do come back from honeymoons. People do recover from surgeries. An “interim” rector for Grace is due there in later August . . .” I guess she sensed my hesitation. Maybe she even anticipated what I was about to say. Because she hurried on with this: “He has to be baptized now because he’s seven month’s old; he growing bigger, and” Now everyone listen carefully, because the real truth is about to be revealed. . . . “he’s about to grow out of the christening dress.” I paused, considering this serious dilemma, and then said: “Okay! I’m a Virginian. I understand. I’ll do it!”

Now, here's the real truth within this story, this story like a parable. Baptism is a moment when the "old" makes way for the "new." Whatever we have been clothed in before, we become clothed anew at baptism. At the time of baptism we are ritually clothed with the Holy Spirit and initiated into the larger family of God where, the idea is, we can grow in love and shared abundance. As wonderful as our biological family may be, there's a sense that we are called into a larger family that will sustain us, encourage us, pray for us, hope for us, as we grow.

If I understand the history of the wearing of this christening dress, Cian is the fifth generation to wear it, with multiple little ones wearing it within some of those generations. You were introduced to this family just before this service began this morning. You saw the size now of those in each of the three generations who are here in this family today. That christening dress couldn't fit any of them now. But its significance is ancient and enduring for this family. Because it marks an understanding of a physical expectation that each child who wore it, like little Cian today, will grow, outgrowing not only the Christening dress but also growing beyond the size of his or her nuclear family as the child grows into the larger world. This morning all of us here are marking little Cian's entrance into the embracing family of Christ where his growth can be nurtured into the life of the larger and larger world that is the Holy's vision for him.

The wearing of an outfit for anyone at the time of baptism signifies, symbolizes the reality of shedding, outgrowing, our external clothing as we take on, become clothed symbolically with something new: an invisible but enduring cloth of the Spirit. As invisible but as certain as the cross I marked on Cian's forehead with holy oil.

Little Cian was clothed with love even before he was born, clothed with the love of his family from the time he was born until now. But baptism is an initiation into something new. Baptism is a ritual that is a rite of passage. One in which we become clothed both with the holy spirit but also with a new sense of being part of a larger community - a community which at the core is about Christ – about transcendent and transforming love – about living in a way that sustains and enhances all of life, not only ours but the life of those around us. Baptism initiates us into the larger community woven together by the love of Christ. In baptism our understanding of ourselves as grounded in something deeper than our DNA, wider than our nuclear family, expands.

And over time, hopefully we come to experience and live within an understanding that we are not only living externally within the presence of powerful life giving, life sustaining force, but that this “force” is within us internally - a holy energy abiding deep within us – one with a powerful elasticity – a creative energy that mysteriously even magically weaves us into something “more” over and over again throughout this journey we call life.

The symbolism of baptism is that of being birthed again, re-born, a reminder that throughout life we will find ourselves, whether we want to or not, shedding what has gotten too small for us and finding that something bigger is right there to offer us new more spacious “clothing” that will see us through to the next stage of living, moving and having being.

So, you family of little Cian, carefully put away this christening dress. Cian is outgrowing it today. But it will be there for the next little one to wear to mark a new beginning in the life of your family and the world in which each little one in your family has been born for reasons intimately known and powerfully unfolding in the heart of God.

And thank you for bringing Cian to us today. His name in Gaelic comes out of the Celtic tradition. In Gaelic it means, ancient, yet enduring. The ritual of baptism in the Christian tradition is two thousand years old. It is an ancient yet enduring rite of passage. This morning little Cian is the message. By his presence in the Presence of all that is holy and sustaining he offers a flesh and blood image of an ancient and enduring message. And we are reminded of the ancient and enduring love of a creating and redeeming God who makes all things new, again and again.

By God’s amazing grace, may it be so