

Clothed in Inclusive Love

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC on Pentecost Sunday June 22nd 2025 – Galatians 3:25-29 & Luke 8:26-39)

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Last week during Refugee Week I watched Adam Liaw's cooking show and each day he had two people who had come to Australia as refugees. Not only did they share amazing recipes, they also shared stories of resilience and of courage and of the welcome they usually received in Australia. They had come from Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran, Ukraine and many other places. Also last week I heard that two of my Persian friends from Brunswick have received their citizenship, which was such a delight for me as they waited here in Australia for many years and despite the hardship they found here, they both welcomed me into their lives.

According to the United Nations the number of people displaced by war and conflict reached an unprecedented level with over 120 million forcibly displaced in the world. In the last decade the number of refugees has tripled to almost 144 million. That is 144 million people looking for safety, for welcome, for compassion and for a home. I hate to think how many more there will be this year, given, the conflict in the Middle East and in parts of Africa.

The bible has a lot to say to us about how we should treat strangers in our midst whether they be refugees, asylum seekers or immigrants. Along with widows and orphans they are the ones we are called to protect and provide for, we cannot let them be outsiders in our community.

Jesus encounters an outsider in our story today. As he is going about his work of breaking down barriers and treating tax collectors, foreigners, women, people with severe illness or other things that made them outsiders in their society, with compassion he comes across a man living on the outskirts of town. Naked and living in the graveyard, he is clearly affected by some kind of mental illness. After an episode with some pigs, which initially annoyed the local pig farmers, Jesus is able to restore this man to wholeness. He is now clothed (both in actual clothes, and also in his right mind the text tells us), and sitting at the feet of Jesus and wanting to join Jesus' motley crew and follow him. Jesus tells him instead, to go home and tell people what God has done for him. Jesus has smashed through the barriers that forced him to be an outsider. He is encouraging him to go back to those who excluded him, perhaps challenging him to draw a large inclusive circle around those who had shunned him, as a way of showing the inclusive love of God.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians is reminding the church there that they are clothed in Christ. 'Clothing' seems to be the theme in our readings today. Because of our baptisms we have been clothed in Christ, wrapped in Christ, incorporated in Christ, children of God. Paul then goes on to describe what that looks like, no longer is their Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. Distinctions that divide are no longer needed, when one is clothed in Christ, ethnic, socio-economic and gender lines are unnecessary. In the first place you are a child of God, that is your primary identity, and those other differences are secondary and pale into insignificance.

Being clothed in Christ means no hierarchy, no one is any better than any other, we are all equally loved, equally included, equally valued and important. In Paul's time this notion was counter-cultural, back then there was an order in society with men at the top and slaves, women, children and animals' way down the bottom.

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This notion is counter-cultural in our society too, whilst we may not have distinctions between slave and free, we do have other distinctions that we make all the time. What comes to mind if you think about the kind of distinctions we make in our world, sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously? Rich and poor, homeless or not, able and disabled, educated or not, gay or straight, asylum seeker or immigrant, indigenous or not, Geelong or Collingwood, Protestant or Catholic and the list goes on.

Jesus and Paul have no time for those who use such distinctions to divide and nor should we. Sure, some of these distinctions might be a way of describing who we are, and we often do this when we are introducing ourselves to others – I would say about myself that I am an educated white female Australian who is a one-eyed Geelong supporter. That goes part way to telling you a little bit about me, but by no means does it define me, and there is much more to who I am. The same would go for you. I would hope such a description would invite conversation rather than lead to judgement about who I am and what I think.

So, what are the implications for us in the church in 2025 of being clothed in Christ, of being clothed in our right mind like the male restored to wholeness in our first story?

We will need to step out of our comfort zones if we are to truly welcome, accept and embrace others. Our fear of difference will have to take a back seat. We will need to embrace our curiosity as we listen to the stories of others. The human tendency to jump to conclusions and judge will need to be put on hold.

We will have to listen carefully to others.

We cannot exercise power over others; the only power we have should be a shared power.

We will have to live as if we are all equal. When I was at school, we had to read a novel called 'Animal Farm' by George Orwell, which was a story based on the power dynamics in society using the analogy of a farm. In the story the pigs were at the top and there is a line in the novel that says something like 'all pigs are equal, but some are more equal than others'. This can never be so when we are clothed in Christ.

We will need to treat each other as brothers and sisters – we are family and even if we get annoyed at each other we will always have each other's back. We will always defend each other. We will always ensure the safety of another. We will always want them to succeed in whatever they do. We will always be proud of who they are. We will always love them.

We will always welcome others into our circle and never leave someone on the outer. We must continue to seek to stand against the view in this country that some people seeking asylum are 'illegal'. When we are clothed in Christ, we will always seek safety and welcome for them.

We will always keep one another safe.

As we look around the world at the moment, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, especially as we seem to be on the brink of a World War. How different would this be if we were all

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clothed in Christ, if we sought to break down barriers that divide, if we sought safety for all, if we acknowledged our shared humanity.

Let's begin we are, some of the most powerful movements in the world began with just a few.

Let's live out Edwin Markham's poem
He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel a thing to flout
But love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle that took him in.¹

Go out brothers and sisters and draw those circles wide. Amen.

¹ 'Outwitted' by Edwin Markham, 1852 – 1940.