

## The Lord's garments : the swaddling cloths. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 11 August 2010.

Over the past three months we have considered (i) our Lord's seven 'I am' sayings in John's gospel and (ii) our Lord's seven sayings from the cross. This week we begin another series of seven studies. And, over the coming weeks, we shall, God willing, be looking at seven instances where the New Testament refer to our Lord's garments.

If I had to choose a Bible text as a heading for the series it would come from the Old Testament – from Psalm 45. Although written centuries before His birth, this psalm speaks of our Lord Jesus – in particular in His office as King.<sup>1</sup> We know that He – the Saviour – is the subject of the psalm because some of its verses are applied directly to Him in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

According to the psalm, the garments of the King are saturated with three costly perfumes: 'All your garments', we read, 'are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia'.<sup>3</sup>

Over the coming weeks, we shall, as it were, peer into the King's wardrobe, and see if we can detect something of the fragrance of our Lord's garments. Over these weeks we shall be looking at seven 'hangers' – seven hangers which hold separately (i) some swaddling bands, (ii) a garment with a very distinctive hem, (iii) raiment which once shone with supernatural brightness and whiteness, (iv) a towel (which may have done service as a slave's apron), (v) a seamless coat, a splendid robe and a purple cloak – all on one hanger, (vi) some linen cloths used for binding the dead, and, finally, (vii) a garment which stretched right down to the feet. And we shall find that each of these items has something to tell us about the glories of our Lord Jesus.

For today then, we take the first hanger, on which we discover some swaddling bands, or cloths. And our Bible text for this morning is taken from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke – a passage more usually read during the Christmas season. Writing of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Doctor Luke records – and I quote – 'she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths; and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn'.<sup>4</sup>

'She ... wrapped Him', I note. Evidently, there was no one to help the young mother, and she needed to both deliver and to wrap her own Babe. What, I wonder, would Doctor Luke have given for the privilege of delivering and binding this very special Babe?

And if this morning I should ask the Saviour what it is that these particular cloths have to tell me about His wonderful Person, I suspect He would say, 'They tell you, Malcolm, of my grace and of my condescension – of the great stoop I took when, over 2,000 years ago, I entered your world'. For Malcolm has his eye on words written by the apostle Paul: 'you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes ('because of you') He became poor'.<sup>5</sup>

As we learn from Luke, these swaddling bands formed part of the sign given to the shepherds out in the field nearby: 'There is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger'.

'A Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths', the angel said. And, in one sense, there was nothing unusual in that. For it was common practice there and then for cloth strips to be bound tightly around the limbs of young infants to prevent those limbs being distorted while they were still weak.

Yes ... but the angel knew well that *this* was no ordinary babe who lay enfolded in these swaddling bands! This was the One who, before He ever entered the world, was, according to Psalm 93, 'robed in majesty' and 'girded with strength' ... the One to whom the psalmist prayed in Psalm 104, 'You are *clothed* with honour ... and *cover yourself* with light as with a garment'.<sup>6</sup>

But see Him now, as 'a Babe, wrapped in swaddling cloths'. Such is the mystery of what we call 'the Incarnation' – when God's only-begotten Son became, as I quoted just now, Mary's 'first-born son'. When He who had ever stood on level ground with God stooped to stand on level ground with me. And this that He might become, in the language of the Bible, the 'one Mediator between God and men'<sup>7</sup> – the only Mediator between God and men! I am reminded of something which Job once said of God; 'He is not a man, as I am, that I may answer Him, and that we should confront each other in a courtroom. Nor is there a mediator between us, who might lay his hand on us both'.<sup>8</sup>

Ah, Job, but *there is!*

And the label on this first hanger from the King's wardrobe ... bearing as the hanger does some very special swaddling bands ... this hanger declares the condescending grace of Him who came down from heaven to be that very Mediator ... declares the condescending grace of Him who, ever being God, had come in the flesh as a very real man, and being now both God and man was able to lay His hand on both, and so to reconcile poor sinners to a holy God.

Yes ... but there was a cost – a fearful cost.

I mentioned earlier that it was once normal practice for cloth strips to be bound tightly around the limbs of young infants to preserve them from distortion.

Little did the shepherds who 'came with haste' to Bethlehem to find the wrapped Babe think that, some 33 years later, those very limbs would be stretched out, when those same – now tiny – hands and feet would be nailed to a cross!

Still less did the men of Bethlehem, Jerusalem or Rome guess that anything momentous had taken place at the time of our Lord's birth.

I have read that there is a plaque which marks the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln near Hodgenville in Kentucky. The plaque records a conversation which it is said took place there in February 1809: 'Any news down't the village, Ezry?' 'Well, Squire McLain's gone t' Washington t' see Madison swore in, and ol' Spellman tells me this Bonaparte fella has captured most o' Spain. What's new out here, neighbour?' 'Nuthin' ... nuthin' a'tall, 'cept fer a new baby born t' Tom Lincoln's. Nothin' ever happens out here'.<sup>9</sup>

'Nothin' ever happens out here', the man said. But little did he know! Little did he know that the baby born in Tom Lincoln's log cabin was destined to be President of the United States and the Emancipator of countless black slaves.

And little did the so-called great men of earth at the turn of the era know that the Babe in the manger was destined to be the Sufferer of the Cross and the Saviour of all those who, in any age, put their trust in Him ... little did they know that the greatest Christmas gift ever came wrapped in swaddling bands.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The title 'king' occurs seven times; Psa. 45. 1, 5, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Psa. 45. 6-7 are quoted in Heb. 1. 8-9 as one of seven Old Testament 'proof texts' that our Lord is superior to the angels.

<sup>3</sup> Psa. 45. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2. 7.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor. 8. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Psa. 93. 1 RSV; Psa. 104. 1-2 RSV.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Tim. 2. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Job 9. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/l/lincoln.htm>