

'They parted my garments among them', John 19. 24. Bethesda Meditation. 28 March 2010.

Following the 'breaking of bread' this morning, David Colman will be speaking to us about our Lord's so-called 'Triumphal Entry' into Jerusalem, recorded in Matthew 21. There we read that the disciples 'placed their garments' on both the ass and its colt, and that the crowd 'spread their garments on the road' ahead of our Lord.¹ But I want us to think now, not about what the disciples and the crowd did with *their* garments when Jesus 'entered Jerusalem',² but what four Roman soldiers did with *His* garments when He was led back out of the city and was crucified.³

To that end, I am taking my reading, not from the first gospel, but from the last (from the Gospel of John) – from chapter 19, verses 23 and 24.

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but let us cast lots for it, whose it shall be' ...

As far as we know, our Lord's garments represented the sum total of His earthly goods. Apart from these, all He could properly call His own was His 'cross'. 'He, bearing His cross', John had written a few verses before, 'went out to a place called the Place of a Skull'.⁴ It is Paul who, some 30 years later, in his letter to the Christians at Colosse, wrote of how He (the Lord Jesus) 'made peace through the blood of His cross',⁵ and how He (the Lord Jesus) erased and set aside our bill of debt to God's broken law, 'nailing it', as Paul put it, 'to His cross'.⁶

As I said, our Lord's garments represented the sum total of His earthly goods. Although we know what his cousin John the Baptist wore, for, we are told, 'John ... was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist',⁷ and although we know something of what the religious leaders wore, for example with enlarged fringes or tassels to their garments,⁸ we know very little about what the Saviour wore.

We know from His teaching that He felt no great concern about what He wore. 'Why are you anxious about clothing?', He asked, 'Consider the lilies of the field ... they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these'.⁹ And yet His garments were not the grubby rags of a beggar. Clearly, from what we have read, the soldiers deemed His clothing to be worthwhile spoil.

It seems likely that, by custom, the garments of an executed man were forfeit, automatically becoming the property of the soldiers on duty,¹⁰ and that, for this reason, it was these men—and not 'His mother', who, we read, 'stood by the cross'—who effectively 'inherited' our Lord's clothing.

We read in Acts 12 that, having had the apostle Peter arrested, Herod Agrippa 'put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him'¹¹ – a quaternion being a group of four soldiers. It is hardly surprising therefore that, together with their centurion, it was four soldiers who were made responsible for our Lord's crucifixion.¹²

And it is these four men who, as we read from John 19, 'took His garments'¹³ – removed from Him the very garments which, according to John 13, He (the Lord Jesus) earlier had willingly 'laid aside' that He might perform the menial (slave-like) task of washing His disciples' feet.¹⁴

Scholars are generally satisfied that, leaving aside the seamless inner tunic, the four pieces which, according to Mark's gospel, the soldiers distributed and apportioned among themselves by casting lots,¹⁵ consisted of (i) His sandals, (ii) His outer cloak-like garment, (iii) His head-gear, and (iv) His girdle, which would each be similar in value.¹⁶

And it was the same four men who then proceeded, by again casting lots, to decide which of them would secure for himself the star prize, worth by far the most ... our Lord's seamless inner tunic¹⁷

And what breathtaking associations each of these garments had!

In all likelihood, these were the very same garments which had, less than a year before, shone ablaze with glory on the Mount of Transfiguration ... according to Matthew's account, as 'white as the light'¹⁸ ... according to Mark's account, 'exceedingly white as snow, such as no launderer on earth could whiten them'¹⁹ ... and, according to Luke's account, had become 'dazzling white'²⁰ – 'dazzling' being the word used to describe the blinding flash of lightning.²¹

Yet now they became the property of four unnamed soldiers.

Just imagine — one of these soldiers left the scene carrying a pair of sandals, which the greatest of Israel's prophets (John the Baptist) had once confessed himself unworthy to carry, and the thong of which he had confessed himself unworthy to unloose.²²

I wonder how many miles those sandals had covered ... as, at least three times each year, the Saviour had walked the 65 miles from Galilee to Jerusalem and back ... as He made His way, among a hundred other places, to Sychar's well, Gadara's tombs and Bethesda's porches.

What I know, is that, although my Lord had been wearing those sandals when Mary of Bethany fell 'at His feet' on the way to *Lazarus's* tomb in John 11,²³ He was most certainly not wearing them when the women 'who had followed Jesus from Galilee ... took hold of His feet' on the way from His (our Lord's) own tomb in Matthew 28!²⁴ And this for the simple reason that, barely two days before, a Roman soldier had carried them away from the Place of a Skull!

But if one of the soldier's walked away with a pair of sandals, the second soldier took with him a cloak-like garment, the border or fringe of which²⁵ had, according to Luke 8, once played an all-important role in the healing of a woman with a hemorrhage that she had failed to staunch over twelve long years.²⁶

And Luke, in that passage, intertwines his casebook account of this poor woman's healing with that of the raising of Jairus' daughter ... drawing attention, on the one hand, to a man who would gladly have given all he had to hold on to something he had enjoyed for twelve years – namely, his only daughter – and, on the other hand, to a woman who had already spent all she had in a vain attempt to rid herself of something she had endured for twelve years.²⁷

But it is most unlikely that soldier number two had ever heard of how a woman from Capernaum had once been healed by touching the edge of the cloak-like garment which he carried away that day.

The third soldier took away with him our Lord's His head-gear, which may well have exuded still the sweet fragrance of the expensive nard with which Mary of Bethany had anointed His head only a matter of days before²⁸ – the fragrance of which had filled the whole house at the time.²⁹

Fifty-seven years ago this month – in March 1953 – the base camp was set up in the Himilayas from which Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conquered Mount Everest. I understand that it is by no means impossible that the 'pure nard' which Mary expended on our Lord had itself come from the high pastureland of the Himalayas.³⁰

But of the reason for any lingering sweet fragrance soldier number three, of course, knew nothing.

The fourth soldier took our Lord's girdle or belt, little suspecting that the Man on the central cross would soon wear, in the symbolic language of Revelation chapter 1, a girdle of gold about His breast.³¹ The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that Israel's priests each had a sash 'girded to the breast a little above the elbows'.³² He assures us also that the girdle – the sash – of the High Priest was distinguished from those of the ordinary priests by 'a mixture of gold interwoven'.³³ But then we have, not just a High Priest, but a *Great High Priest* – the whole of whose girdle is gold!

But to such matters, soldier number four was, of course, oblivious.

And then, finally, in all likelihood by the toss of the same knuckle-bone dice, one of the four won himself the star prize, and, together with his other item, took away with him our Lord's inner tunic.³⁴ In that this was both woven and seamless, it resembled that of Israel's High Priest, but, unlike the garment worn then by Caiaphas – and which during our Lord's so-called trial, in blatant disobedience to the Law of God, he (Caiaphas) had rent – our Lord's tunic had never been torn!³⁵

In a passage applied by the writer to the Hebrews to our Lord Jesus,³⁶ Psalm 45 speaks metaphorically of 'all' the garments of our Lord Jesus as 'smelling of myrrh and aloes and cassia'.³⁷ Based on those words, in 1915 a young pianist penned the opening words of a song later entitled 'Ivory Places' ... the first verse runs ...

My Lord has garments so wondrous fine,
And myrrh their texture fills;
Its fragrance reached to this heart of mine,
With joy my being thrills.

And the chorus reads ...

Out of the ivory palaces,
Into a world of woe,
Only His great eternal love
Made my Saviour go.³⁸

And we can all say 'Amen' to that!

Footnotes

¹ Matt. 21. 7-8.

² Matt. 21. 10.

³ The word translated 'garments' (ἱμάτια) being the same in each case.

⁴ John 19. 17.

⁵ Col. 1. 20.

⁶ Col. 2. 14.

⁷ Matt. 3. 4.

⁸ Matt. 23. 5.

⁹ Matt. 6. 28-29.

¹⁰ 'The victim's clothes customarily became the perquisite of the executioners', D. A. Carson on Matt. 27. 35. So too Dr Thomas Constable, on John 19. 21-22. But see A. Edersheim, 'The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah', volume II, pages 591-592.

¹¹ Acts 12. 4.

¹² In marked contrast to the four women who 'stood by the cross of Jesus' – 'beholding', 'looking on', as Mark tells us, Mark 15. 40 – we read of the four men who, as Matthew tells us, 'sat down and kept watch over Him there', Matt. 27. 36 ... presumably to prevent anyone from attempting to rescue Him.

¹³ This was, indeed, the second occasion that the soldiers had removed our Lord's own clothes from Him; cf. Matt. 27. 28.

¹⁴ John 13. 4.

¹⁵ 'When they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take', Mark 15. 24.

¹⁶ See, for example, A. Edersheim, *ibid.*, page 592. Also Thomas Constable on John 19. 23-24.

¹⁷ A. Edersheim, *ibid.*, page 592.

¹⁸ Matt. 17. 2.

¹⁹ Mark 9. 3.

²⁰ Luke 9. 29.

²¹ This is a strengthened form of the word used by our Lord, when He said, 'as *the lightning* that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His day', Luke 17. 24.

²² 'I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist', Luke 7.28. 'I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry', Matt. 3. 11; 'One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose', Luke 3. 16.

²³ John 11. 32.

²⁴ Matt. 28. 9 with Matt. 27. 55-56..

²⁵ See D. A. Carson on Matt. 9. 20-21.

²⁶ Luke 8. 44; Matt. 9. 20; cf. Num. 15. 38; Matt. 23. 5, and, for separate reasons, Luke 6. 19.

²⁷ Luke 8. 42-43.

²⁸ In a passage applied in the New Testament to our Lord Jesus (Psa. 45. 6-7 with Heb. 1. 8-9), Psalm 45 speaks metaphorically of the garments of our Lord Jesus as 'fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia', Psa. 45. 8. See J. Flanigan, 'Psalms', page 205.

²⁹ Matt. 26. 7; Mark 14. 3; John 12. 3.

³⁰ See the IVP New Testament Commentary on John 12. 3. Also, 'the essence of this ointment was derived from pure nard, which is an aromatic herb grown in the high pasture-land of the Himilayas between Tibet and India', W. Hendriksen on John 12. 3.

³¹ Rev. 1. 13. John informs us in his gospel that he was known personally to the High Priest – and that, as such, he had access to the High Priest's palace (or court) – to which he was also able to secure access for Peter, John 18. 15-16. I assume therefore that John was familiar with the High Priest's garments as described by Josephus – and it is at least possible that John may have interpreted both the Saviour's garment to the foot and the golden sash in terms of His priesthood.

³² Antiquities Book III, Chapter VII, paragraph 2. High girding was an indication of high status; see the Expositors Greek Testament on Rev. 1. 13 : *A long robe reaching to the feet, was an oriental mark of dignity {cf. on i. 7, and Ezek. ix. 2, 11, LXX}, denoting high rank or office such as that of Parthian kings or of the Jewish high priest who wore a purple one. High girding (with a belt ?) was another mark of lofty position, usually reserved for Jewish priests, though the Iranians frequently appealed to their deities as "high-girt" (».«.., ready for action = c/"*. Yasht xv. 54, 57, "Vaya of the golden girdle, high-up girded, swift moving, as powerful in sovereignty as any absolute sovereign in the world"). *The golden buckle was part of the insignia of royalty (i Mace. x. 8, 9, xi. 58).*

³³ Antiquities, Book III, Chapter VII, paragraph 4.

³⁴ John 19. 24.

³⁵ See Matt. 26. 65 and John 19. 24; cf. Exod. 28. 32; Lev. 21. 10.

³⁶ Psa. 45. 6-7 with Heb. 1. 8-9.

³⁷ Psa. 45. 8.

³⁸ Billy Graham wrote, '[This song] was written very near to my home in the mountains of North Carolina. In the summer of 1915 the famous evangelist Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman was preaching at the Presbyterian conference grounds at Montreat. With him were the songleader Charles M. Alexander, soloist Albert Brown, and their pianist Henry Barraclough. Barraclough, the author of this hymn, was a twenty-four-year-old Britisher; he had met Chapman the previous year during a preaching mission in England. During the conference, the evangelist spoke one evening on the forty-fifth Psalm ... He believed, as I do, that this is a prophetic, "Messianic" psalm which speaks of the relationship of Christ, the bridegroom, to his bride, the church... . After the evening service, "Charlie" Alexander and Henry Barraclough drove some friends to the Blue Ridge YMCA Hostel a few miles away. Sitting in the front seat of the car, young Barraclough thought about the message and the four short phrases of the refrain began to take shape in his mind. When they stopped at a little village store, he quickly wrote them down on a "visiting card"—the only paper that was available. Returning to the conference hotel, he worked out the first three stanzas, using the outline of Chapman's message. The following morning Mrs. Alexander and Mr. Brown sang the new hymn in the Montreat conference session'.

Quoted in *Crusader Hymns and Hymn Stories*, by Cliff Barrows and Donald Hustad, The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1967.