

## THE LEOPARD SKIN COAT AND THE SHOPPING BAG

**PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor**

Sunday, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2009

**Easter 7**

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

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I want to start this sermon with a true story told by Kenneth Williams the comic actor in his autobiography.

Orson Welles was once in a production of *Julius Caesar* running in tandem at the same theatre with *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was one of those open-stage productions with no curtains, so that scene changes took place as the lights were killed and the cast quickly reformed themselves in the darkness.

During a matinee of *Julius Casear*, in the middle of the stabbing scene of Caesar's assassination, the stage door opened and on walked an actress called Madie Christians. Since there was no scenery, she was in full view of the audience.

Now Madie was not in *Julius Casear*; no, she was in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and she had forgotten that there was a matinee that afternoon of the other play and she had just popped in to retrieve something that she had left on stage.

Madie was wearing a leopard skin coat and was carrying a string bag full of her groceries.

She far from evoked ancient Rome!

Realising her terrible mistake, she went down on one knee and put her hand to her forehead in a pose of doom and horror.

As soon as the lights dimmed for the scene change, she made a dash for the stage door but in the total darkness she became hopelessly entangled with a bunch of senators manoeuvring into their new positions.

When the lights came up, Madie was still on stage with her shopping bag and leopard skin coat, and Orson Welles testified that in fact she never got off the stage for the rest of the performance - and the audience kept finding her kneeling in different parts of the stage!!!

I just love that story – it makes me laugh inside and out.

Dramatists and theatre producers have these problems over the entrances and exits of the players. But so do we in everyday life: arriving on time and in the right place are critical, just as are our leave-taking and departures.

And on this Sunday, the Seventh Sunday of Easter and the Sunday after the Ascension, we have celebrated the withdrawal of the risen Christ from his disciples as he is taken into the glory of eternity beyond human sight.

On the stage of this world, it is hard for us to imagine and envision this exit in practical terms – only that the Jesus who was raised from the tomb changed yet again beyond physical recognition and was no longer limited by a geographical location.

The gospel account of the Ascension of Christ is about the universality and eternity of God's loving power and presence in the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus.

The Jesus, who has lived amongst us as a fully human life, now lives and reigns in heaven beyond the dimensions and limitations of our human understanding and experience: he is the Christ, the son of the eternal Father.

Now that sounds much more like theology than theatre.  
And we are left with questions such as:

*Is God still with us?*  
and  
*Whose stage are we on and whose production are we in?*

As Shakespeare so powerfully painted our human condition in words, this world is like a great stage and life is indeed a grand drama.

Theatre and art replicate and copy life itself.

And so we find ourselves with lives that are relatively or actually short and in many ways shaped and ordered only by our fitting in with the setting and lives of those around us.

Our news over the past days has been dominated by the theatrical troupe of the Westminster village!

Their lifestyle and working of a system of privilege and trust has highlighted how differently we are set and see ourselves and one another, and how strange and blinkered are our perceptions of great and critical things like truth, and right and wrong.

As Christians, it may well be that we will stand out incongruously in a culture and society lit and managed by very different and opposing values.

It is this situation that our readings this morning envisage: when the family of Jesus has to live in a world which neither recognises him yet alone loves, worships, obeys and follows him.

The first reading from the Acts records the practical need to replace Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus and hanged himself.

The essential qualification for this apostle was that he should have been present all through the story *beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.*

And then as I John adds in our second reading, this 'testimony' of their experience becomes a part of us, because we too receive the Spirit and through our baptism know the forgiveness of sins and experience the eternal life of Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel reading then leads us into the prayer of Jesus for his followers as he approached his death. He promises all who know and love him that protection from the evil one and that sanctification that leads his people into the truth.

Here is a drama and a journey set within the pages of history and within your life and mine.

God in Jesus and those who belong to him are in the world with its cares and joys and needs but they are neither determined nor destroyed by them.

At times the many parts and sub plots of the human drama may see us all in familiar, everyday roles and identities, but Christians are also called out and set apart to have a distinctive, and at times dissonant, role and voice.

We are players in God's drama and here at the altar we drawn in to his eternal drama and the story in human time when Jesus breaks into every production and every stage of human living.

Above all, he consecrates and protects us by his grace and presence in our outstretched hands and hearts and minds as we receive him, his body and blood, in what every life depends on: food and drink.

Jesus enters our lives wherever we are and unites us to the real world of God's hunger in the world today and to his feast in heaven in eternity.

This is the saving role and drama of the divine protagonist.

In our secular culture we are encouraged to succeed by short term gain, public esteem and status, material possession and self- fulfilment.

Our political leaders have epitomised this in recent days and we, Christ's people, are called to show the world another way which is both beyond our sight and also clearly visible in the ordinariness of our daily living.

George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, wrote:

*Invisible we see You, Christ above us,  
With earthly eyes we see above us  
clouds or sunshine, grey or bright,  
But with the eye of faith we know  
You reign;  
instinct in the sun ray,  
speaking in the storm,  
warming and moving all creation,  
Christ above us.*

*The Whole Earth Shall Cry Glory*

And Evelyn Underhill, mystic and writer in the last century wrote:

The solid form of the spiritual life should be like that of the natural life: a matter of porridge, bread and butter, and a cut off the joint. The extremes of joy, discipline, vision, are not in our hands, but in the Hand of God ...The supernatural can and does find us, in and through our daily experience: the invisible in the visible. There is no need to be peculiar in order to find God.

*Given to God*

Some people, though, might be wearing a leopard skin coat or carrying a shopping bag!

**Amen.**