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# The Naked Truth

Matthew 25.31-46

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 23, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Nakedness. If you're young and beautiful, naked may be an intimate word, a word full of promise, of sexual discovery and the wonder of sight and touch. If you're very sick or maybe of senior years, naked may be a trembling word, an encounter with your own humanity, the fragility of skin and bone that makes you shudder and quake. If you're hiding a big secret, naked is perhaps a terrifying word, a word that instils fear of disclosure, fear of others seeing who you really are, fear of the truth. If you're very young, maybe newly born, naked simply means innocence, smooth skin that invites love and tenderness.

"When did we see you naked?" What an extraordinary question. According to today's gospel, that's the question every single one of us, indeed every single person there's ever been and ever will be, will ask Jesus on judgement day. Every single person in the history of the world will gather and every single one will say to Jesus, "When did we see you naked?"

And Jesus will say, "You remember the day I was crucified. You saw me whipped and scourged by the soldiers, didn't you? I was naked then. Those soldiers saw me naked. They clothed me. They gave me a purple robe and a crown of thorns. Just what I'd always wanted. But it wasn't just the soldiers who got it so terribly wrong. You see, every one of those moments I described to you, the hunger, the thirst, the homelessness, the sickness, the imprisonment – they all happened to me. You really did see me hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick and in prison. When you forget that you saw me hungry and thirsty and everything else, you're forgetting the gospel story. As for hunger, you know I spent 40 days in the wilderness, don't you? I was hungry then. I was offered a stone so I could turn it into bread. Very helpful. As for thirst, you remember on the cross I said "I'm thirsty," don't you? They gave me a sponge dipped in vinegar. So thoughtful. And as for being a stranger, d'you remember the words, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." You remember how they treated me when I went home to Nazareth? Tried to push me off the cliff. Makes you wonder what they do to people they *really* don't like. I was certainly a stranger then. And as for being sick, d'you remember when I was in Gethsemane, and my sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground? And what did my companions do? They fell asleep. Very affirming. And remember when I was led away to prison, and my closest companion followed at a distance, and was asked three times if he knew me, and three times denied it at the top of his voice? Not a great record, is it?"

If you say it would've been easier for us if we'd met Jesus face to face, then if he'd been hungry, or thirsty, or naked or a stranger or sick or in prison, of course we'd have dropped everything for him – well then you've got to reckon with the fact that he *was* all those things and those closest to him did nothing of the kind.

So if we read this story and we're wanting to say, but Jesus, it's hard to spot you among all the hungry, all the thirsty, all the naked, all the strangers, all the sick, and all the prisoners, then we're in good company, because even when Jesus *was* dead easy to spot, people seemed to find it pretty hard to offer him food, drink, clothing, shelter, or company. This really is the most infuriating story, because we consistently say to Jesus, "Look, I like the love your neighbor and don't worry and exalting the humble and meek and especially the eternal life stuff, but I still struggle with knowing you're really there and having much idea what you're really up to." And Jesus in this story says, "Hey, let me make it easy for you. You know anyone sick? That's where to find me. You know anyone hungry or homeless or in prison? Maybe not: - but you know where to find them, don't you? Well, that's where to find me." Simple, really. But we prefer to make it a whole lot more complicated. We'd rather read a book on the absence of God or the failure of religion than go to where Jesus has told us he hangs out. God comes to us naked in the form of the hungry, the homeless and the prisoner. But we find it too embarrassing, and keep away. And then we ask why we can't seem to feel close to God. Hmmm.

So the first part of the naked truth is that Jesus has become naked before us and we can't handle it. But there's a second part of the naked truth of this story. And that's its simplicity. We're at a university. Here we do very

important things. Got a problem with food? Ok, we've got dietary sciences that look into malnutrition and what foodstuffs are required in an emergency. We've got counselling and psychological services that can help out if you're struggling with an eating disorder. Is it thirst that's the issue? Have you heard about our engineering school and the wells they're building in different parts of the developing world? D'you know about those tablets that can purify water in a snap? Oh, and as for clothing, we've invented these incredible fibres that actually breathe so you only need to wear one layer whether it's sweaty summer or snowy winter. And there are no strangers here and no one's lonely because we all meet each other on the internet. And don't you know we have a fabulous hospital so don't you worry about getting sick. And we're doing extensive statistical research into various indicators of crime rates so we're much better able to track ex-prisoners and reduce recidivism.

Technological societies do many wonderful and expert things. But it turns out this story isn't really about doing wonderful and expert things. It's about doing simple things. It doesn't say "You ended world hunger." Ending world hunger would be wonderful, and we make ourselves busy and important debating whether genetically-modified foods would do it or whether that concentrates too much power in the hands of transnational corporations. We are so busy discussing these things that we forget it says "You gave me something to eat." It doesn't say "You provided clean and readily available drinking water for the whole world." That would make a worthy Millennium Development Goal, but while pursuing it governmentally and diplomatically we can forget the words "You gave me a drink." Each of the six acts of mercy is disarmingly simple. "When I was sick you visited me." It doesn't say, you cured me. It doesn't say, you labored night and day in laboratory and science park to find and test a crucial vaccine. That's terrific work, but it's not what the story says. The story says, "You visited me." The same for prisons. Heaven knows there's plenty wrong with our criminal justice system. And it's great to be a lawyer or an activist or a politician and try to do something about it. But the story says, "I was in prison and you visited me." You don't need a masters' degree to be a disciple of Jesus. It's not rocket science. Jesus has said. "You're finding me hard to track down. I'll let you into a secret: you can find me in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked. You're wondering how to follow me. Ok, let me make it easy for you. Care for the sick. Visit those in prison. Just do it, ok? Don't make it harder than it is.

To say the naked truth of discipleship is simple isn't to say it's naïve. In 1943 the psychologist Abraham Maslow published a paper explaining what he called the hierarchy of human needs. He made the point that we can't really engage with higher matters until our basic physiological needs are met, and then our safety needs and then our belonging needs and then our esteem needs and finally we get to this wonderful point where we can work on our self-actualization. (I hope you don't mind, but I'd be grateful if we could all keep working for the next few years on my esteem needs and then I'll let you know when I'm about ready to work on my self-actualization.) But Maslow could've saved himself a lot of research and got pretty much the whole theory from this story. Jesus starts with food and drink, then moves up to clothing and shelter, and finishes with company and love. Sounds pretty much like a hierarchy of needs to me. If you look at these six acts of mercy, you can find the roots of almost every charitable or non-profit or welfare organization there is. The problem comes when the non-profit world gets so tangled up in systemic analysis or bureaucratic sclerosis that it loses sight of the simplicity of this story.

Remember this account of the last judgement is the final story Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel. It's a summing up in more ways than one. In John's gospel Jesus doesn't tell symbolic stories - he performs symbolic actions. And the last symbolic action Jesus performs in John's gospel before he goes to the cross is to wash the disciples' feet. Washing the disciples' feet is John's version of this last judgement story. Jesus gives the disciples one simple action by which to incarnate and embody everything he has been for them. And we find a hundred ways why this simple gesture is too complicated or too embarrassing.

But maybe we could think of both the footwashing and the giving of food, drink, shelter and clothing in this way. Together, they constitute a kind of third sacrament. The first sacrament is baptism. Baptism is a kind of washing but it doesn't make you physically clean for ever. It's just the way Jesus promises to come among us taking us from the death of sin and decay to the life of faith and grace. So we do it, because he told us to. The second sacrament is Eucharist. The Eucharist is a kind of meal but it doesn't take away our hunger and thirst, certainly not for ever. It's just the way Jesus promises to come among us, turning our scarcity into his abundance, re-enacting the liberation of the exodus and prefiguring the heavenly banquet. So we do it, because he told us to. And these simple gestures, washing feet and sheltering the stranger, are a third sacrament. They

don't end poverty now. They're just the way Jesus promises to come naked before us, as intimate with us as we could want to be with him, turning our embarrassment into his tenderness, taking our powerlessness in the face of abstract nouns like poverty and crime and making it into real people whom we can meet face to face and in whose eyes we can see his eyes. Sacraments aren't naïve. They're simple acts that shape communities in which we can know we are close to Jesus. The story into today's gospel is describing a third sacrament.

So that's the naked truth about Jesus, that he comes to us in the stranger and the prisoner. And that's the naked truth about discipleship, that it's basically about simple actions regularly and humbly performed, not with regard to strategic outcome but more with regard to meeting Jesus. But there's one more naked truth in this story. It's the naked truth about ourselves.

Dressing up our responses to human distress in the clothing of review committees, strategy teams, research projects, and professional roles has its place, but when we read this story it sounds suspiciously like covering over our own nakedness. Our nakedness in the face of others' distress, and our nakedness in the face of our own. Face to face with a hungry and thirsty person, a homeless person, a sick person or a prisoner, we can no longer insulate ourselves from the rawness they represent, and we can no longer insulate ourselves from the rawness of our own lives. We can no longer say "they." We find ourselves saying "we." To have achieved a certain level of wealth in our culture is to have access to certain comforts. Those comforts are all about protecting us from the rawness of life. Meeting a hungry person or a prisoner can be like encountering an icy wind that goes clean through our clothes and makes us feel that chilling rawness. The insulation has failed. We are exposed.

Naked as you and I fundamentally are, naked as this story shows us to be, I want finally to ask you these simple questions. Where are you hungry? Where are you thirsty? Where are you naked? Where are you a stranger? Where are you sick? Where are you in prison? These are the places of our nakedness. These are the points of nakedness we fear to be revealed when we encounter the rawness of others' distress. We want to come before the judgement seat clothed in our achievements, our professionalism, our possessions, our polite distance. But it turns out Jesus sees through all that clothing, and sees us naked as the day we were born.

One day we will ask Jesus. "When did we see you naked?" And he will answer, "That moment when you stood before or beside the least of my brothers and sisters, and realized, however painfully, that you were just as naked before me as they are."