

Naked we came into the world, naked we shall depart

Naked when we came ... that's easy enough to understand. Imagine a small, wriggling, pink baby with a fully-developed voice! But no clothes!!

And naked we shall depart? Surely not! We expect to be dressed in familiar clothes, in which our relatives are certain we shall feel comfortable, feel 'ourselves'.

'Naked' is a code-word for something else. It doesn't just mean 'without clothing'. Think of the old adage You can't take it with you when you go. What exactly can you not take with you when you go? The answer, surely, perhaps disappointingly, is 'everything'. Your nearest and dearest, your clothes, the view from your favourite window, the books and music you love, your possessions, your assets, your achievements, honours, talents, investments, your 'style'. It is in this sense that we came into the world naked — not merely without clothes, but without all that other stuff too. And it is without them, too, that we shall depart.

When we reach the hour of judgement what will God see? What we pride ourselves upon? All that stuff? The clothes we feel comfortable in? Our style? Our achievements, our publications, our sermons, our cooking, our reputation? Indeed not. God looks on the heart, not on the externals. So, we depart without everything that makes us 'us'. Without our identity. How are we going to cope?

Writing to the Philippians, Paul reminded them that 'our citizenship is in heaven'. They were very proud of their city's location, its resources, its achievements, its reputation, even of the fact that its citizens were honorary citizens of the Roman Empire. But Paul taught them to prize, above all of that, their citizenship in heaven.

The truth is that we have become addicted to all that *stuff*, all those *things*, all those *ideas*. They define us; they are the ways in which we present ourselves to the world (and to ourselves); they are the screens behind which we conceal our innermost selves. 'Naked we shall depart' implies that we must rid ourselves of those addictions in order to be prepared for the moment of departure.

The problem lies in the nature of our addiction. These things are an expression of us. Without them how can we be ourselves? They represent our creativity, our inventiveness; they are our consolation when we are weary, our refreshment when exhausted.

In the church of the first Christian centuries (and still in some Christian traditions) candidates for baptism change into simple white clothes for the ceremony. This is not just an administrative convenience to avoid getting expensive 'posh' clothes wet. It is an important symbolic component of the rite of baptism, shedding an old identity in order to acquire a new identity. In the ancient church, most candidates for baptism took on a new name — a 'Christian' name. This too signified the shedding of an old identity and the acquisition of a new. Using quaint language Paul talked of 'putting off the old

man' (which has given rise to some rather coarse music-hall jokes) and 'putting on Christ'. Behold, all things are new. If anyone is 'in Christ' he is a new creature.