

One of the features of the professional game of football is the transfer market. As the transfer window approaches speculation rises as to who is going to be on the move, which player wants to move, which club is keen to get rid of a player. There can be some real surprises such as the move by Robin Van Percy from Arsenal to Manchester United, as his appearance at the press conference to announce the move in his Manchester United shirt. The change represented more than just a change in his shirt, it represented a change in allegiance, in commitment.

Our own choice of clothes says something about how we see ourselves, how we like to be seen by the world at large. Periodically people will go for a new style, a new image. In this we might be influenced by what we see in the magazines or on the TV. Or it might just be recognising that the years are passing by and the styles of our youth don't look just the same on our rather more mature bodies.

The portion set to be read from Paul's letter to the Romans speaks of changing clothes. It speaks of laying aside the works of darkness. The word we translate as 'laying aside' has connotations of taking off clothes. He goes on to speak of putting on the armour of light, of putting on, clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

This particular passage has a particular association with one of the great figures of the early Christian Church, St Augustine. Born into a Christian home, in his early years he had turned his back on the faith and led a dissolute life of wine, women and song. His mother tried desperately, to no avail, to get him to change. On one occasion she had persuaded him to come and stay with her for a few days. Walking in the garden he recalls

becoming aware of a voice within that kept on saying, ‘Tolle, lege.’; pick up and read. he came across a copy of the scriptures and opened it at this passage with its commands to put aside the deeds of darkness, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. At that moment, he recalls becoming aware of the mess he had made of his life up to that date, the pain he had caused to those who loved him. It was a turning point in his life as he made a very specific commitment to Christ. He went on from there to become one of the great theologians of the Church, valued by all traditions.

I was talking earlier of changes in style that project a new image of ourselves. These are basically superficial and do not represent any profound change in our lives. Robin Van Percy’s change in football shirt certainly represented a change in commitment and allegiance but other than that it could not be described as life changing.

Augustine’s change in spiritual clothing on the other hand represented a change in allegiance and with that a profound change in life – a change we would refer to as repentance. Few of us would have lead the dissolute life of young Augustine, but each us us needs periodically to hear that call that he heard in his mother’s garden to put aside the deeds of darkness – and we all know in our own hearts what that my mean for us – it may be a matter of habit, a matter of attitude that we know is wrong – and to put on Christ, to accept his loving authority in our hearts.

One of the figures we would associate with Advent is that of Joh the Baptist, who is presented to us as one who prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. A hall mark of his ministry was his call to the people of

his day to repentance; to call them back to faithfulness, to make a new start in their walk with God.

Traditionally the Church has observed with season of Advent as a season of preparation for the feast of Christmas. A season of looking back to his first coming but also looking forward to his coming in glory. So there is a distinctive flavour to Advent which is quite different to Christmas. At Christmas the tone of our worship is quite rightly one of celebration. Advent on the other hand is to be more reflective. It is a time to reflect on our own standing before God, to review our own discipleship. a time to look at areas where we may have slipped, in our attitudes towards worship, our attitudes towards other people, our complacency in our following of Christ.

To emphasise this discipline of reflection, we are going to pay more stress on our times of silence in worship. There will be no music, no words from the front – we are just invited to enter into the stillness, maybe glance at a lesson or a verse of a hymn that may have caught our attention earlier in the service

Advent is a time to reflect on the sheer wonder of the gift that is our in Christ, ‘that God so loved the world that he gave his only son ...’. That when Advent is past and Christmas is upon us, we may sing with joy and conviction those wonderful Christmas hymns and carols that celebrate the birth of Christ.