

Clerical Robes

Latimer's Curate

Latimer's Curate has, for some time now, been pondering the benefits, or not, of wearing clerical robes during Sunday services, especially in a parish where the wearing of robes has been the norm for many years. The curate has to confess to being faced with a conundrum: should he wear the robes out of respect for the tradition of said parish, or should he hold fast to his own tradition of being free of such clerical garb?

You'd think that such a decision would be easy, wouldn't you? But it isn't. On the one hand he risks offending those members of the congregation who see the robe as part of Anglican identity and tradition; and on the other hand there are those who agree with the curate's own view that robes can be a barrier to developing personal relationships. Of course the curate always wears his robes at the 8 o'clock Eucharistic service, as indeed that is a rubric of the NZ prayer book, but is it necessary at a more contemporary service, or does it actually hinder mission?

So recently the curate took the plunge one Sunday and appeared before the congregation at the contemporary 10 o'clock service minus robes... and not a word was said... to the curate anyway! Well that's not quite true, after the service he did receive some positive comments from those present, it wasn't until a few days later that disapproving comments came to his notice. He decided to talk things through with the congregation and explain his reasoning, which goes as follows:

No matter what he wears, once people find out he's clergy, it affects how they see him. Even wearing the humble clergy collar allows them to decide how to act around him before they even speak to him. The curate has also noticed, when in conversation with strangers, that when he's not wearing any clerical garb people would often change how they acted once they heard what he did. Sometimes it would be positive, but more often than not they would become guarded, perhaps not even aware of the walls they put up. He's discovered, though, that over time those barriers come down especially as they learn to trust the person behind the collar. If that's the case with the humble clergy collar, just think of how much a barrier to relationships

robes and vestments might be to strangers and visitors!

There is, though, a more obvious reason for not wearing clerical robes... its archaic. Robe wearing is a hangover from a bygone age, stemming from the days when every self-respecting professional gentleman wore a robe or cassock as a sign of their education and standing in the community. It is not so today. Nobody dresses that way anymore, except perhaps at graduation ceremonies. To be set apart by the wearing of special ceremonial clothes goes against the grain of our society and may lead to a sense of self-importance by those who indulge themselves that way. But as Christians are all supposed to be one in Christ, the priesthood of all believers, the curate is no more 'special' than any other member of the congregation.

It has also been said that ordained clergy have been 'set apart', but to do what exactly? Not to be held up as some mediator between the congregation and God for the sins and shortcomings of the people, dressed in fine robes, as the Old Testament priests were. If this curate has been set apart it is merely to teach the congregation to follow Christ by the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, and to ensure that the sacraments of baptism and communion are duly and orderly administered. In the light of this it seems, to this curate anyway, that the wearing of robes places too much a burden of expectation on the minister to be what God has not called them to be.

But don't let the curate put you off your church if your minister wears a robe, he maintains that it's an individual choice, one made according to personal conviction. All this curate can say is that it is his preference is to not wear robes.