

## The Rector's Shorts

There was a bit of a kerfuffle in the parish just before Christmas about whether or not the Rector should wear shorts. I unexpectedly received an email informing me that lots of people in the village (both churchgoers and non-churchgoers) were offended by the sight of me in shorts. Some people, it was said, didn't come to church because of my shorts. I hasten to say that there are prescribed vestments for church services which I always wear on Sundays. What I wear under the prescribed vestments (if anything) is nobody's business, but mine.

I've got to be a bit careful here because it's only too easy to offend people. I know I'm a bit like Mr Spock in "Star Trek". I work things out logically, but don't always pick up the emotional vibes and I can't quite see why people get upset about things with which there is nothing actually wrong on strictly rational terms. However, thinking about the issue, it raises so many important points (and a few mildly comical ones) that I thought I should write an article about it.

I start with some sympathy for the anti-shorts brigade. I'm quite a traditionalist myself. When I first saw a vicar in shorts, I was mildly shocked. I think I was about thirteen at the time. So it would have been around 1967 and things have moved on a lot since then. Many men wear shorts in the Summer and a few of us do so throughout the year. There's an oddity here in that I have heard it said that some people are not offended by shorts in Summer, but that they are unacceptable or even indecent in Winter. That's where I can't see the logic. If the sight of bare knees is inoffensive in warm weather, why does it become indecent in colder weather? At what temperature do the rules change and who makes the rules?

Leaving that aside, if it is acceptable that most men these days on occasion wear shorts, why do some people say that it is indecent for the Rector to wear shorts? Clergy legs are no different from anybody else's.

I doubt that anyone would tell me that I must wear long trousers (or a cassock) when out running or cycling or playing sport, but (here's my rational mind working again), if I can run or cycle wearing shorts, what's the problem if I'm wearing shorts when I'm walking, gardening or sitting in the park? Nobody objects to swimming trunks on the beach or in the sea.

Then there is the question of woman ministers. If the sight of clerical legs is so offensive, must female clergy wear long trousers or ankle length skirts? I rather like the idea of archdeacons acting like the headmistresses of girls' schools and going around with a tape measure to check on hem lines, but, in these days of enforced equality, I don't see how you can have different rules for men and for women.

My e correspondent assured me that there were no objections to men in general wearing shorts. It was only me that some people regarded as indecent if not fully trousered right down to the feet. And that's where the discussion becomes interesting. Why would there be different rules for the clergy? I'm not closer to God than other Christians. I'm not holier than other Christians. I'm not called to live my life to a higher standard than other Christians. We use the word "priest" for Christian ministers, but it is somewhat misleading. In the Old Testament, priests came between God and ordinary members of the people of God, but that is all done away with in the New Testament. In the New Testament, the word "priest" has just two meanings. Jesus is the only high priest. He alone is truly holy. Only He is worthy to enter into the Presence of God, to offer the sacrifice, to make intercession for the world, to judge the world, to bless and to sanctify, to deliver God's grace to the world, to pour out the Holy Spirit onto the world. Only Jesus is holy, because He alone has fully kept God's perfect law of love, loving so perfectly that He offered Himself as a sacrifice for the redemption of the world. You don't need me to represent you to God or to represent God to you. You need only Jesus.

And that brings me to the other meaning of the word "priest" in the New Testament. All Christians are priests. All Christians have access to God through faith in Jesus Christ. He makes us worthy. If you come to God in faith, He hears your prayers and He uses you to accomplish His purposes in the world. There is nothing special about me or any other minister of religion. Our task is to make it easier for you to come to

Jesus and enter yourself into the Presence of God. All baptised people are priests. All Christians have access to the Father and all Christians are called to be conduits of His grace to the world. All Christians are righteous by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and by His grace alone.

I'm no closer to God, no holier, than any other Christian believer. Neither am I held to a higher standard. What God requires of all of us is that we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and that we love our neighbours as ourselves. Jesus tells everyone who desires to follow Him to be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect. The people of God are called to be holy as God is holy. That means all the people of God, not just those who can write "Reverend" before their names.

To be a minister, as I am, is a vocation, a calling. Ministry is not, however, the only calling. Every Christian ought to regard his or her life as a vocation. Whatever you do, whoever you are, you should seek God's guidance. Ask Him what He wants you to do with your life: if you should marry, whom you should marry; what you should do for a living; where you should live; how you might best spend your leisure hours, how you should spend your money. God has a purpose for every life, including yours and mine. And whatever you do do, see it as a vocation. Do your best for God's sake, not because you'll be rewarded if you work hard or punished if you don't.

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, *do* all in the Name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by Him. (Colossians 3<sup>17</sup>).

It is concerning that some people might be influenced by the Rector's leisure attire in deciding whether or not to come to Church. It would be just as worrying if people came to church mainly because they liked me as if they stayed away because they didn't. We don't come to Church to worship the Rector; we come to Church to worship God. In Church, we experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; we hear God's Word; we participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion as Christ commanded us to do. We really ought not to be influenced by our own personal likes and dislikes – how we get on with the Rector and other members of the congregation, our personal preferences about music, forms of service, etc.. It is a privilege to take part in worship, one which depends on the grace of God alone. Given that, as Christians, we are called to love one another as Christ loves us, it is extremely regrettable that we don't always like one another much even in the same congregation. We are, however, only human and we shan't be made perfect till we get to Heaven. In the meantime, the best we can do is to ask God's forgiveness for our failure to love Him wholeheartedly and our failure to love our neighbours as ourselves, and to ask God's grace to become better people. The Church is rather like a family. We do love one another even though we sometimes rub one another up the wrong way. It is a tragedy, whether in a church or a family, if people get to the point where they have so far fallen out that they no longer love one another.

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. (John 4<sup>23</sup>).

I don't think I want to leave this before we have considered the danger of judging by appearances. The Bible makes it quite clear that God doesn't do this. God knows the heart and it is the heart which matters. As Christians, our calling is to be like Jesus. That surely means that we don't go by appearances. What matters about people is not whether they are well dressed or good looking. What matters is what kind of people they are, their character, what is in their heart. Whether it's children getting laughed at at school because their parents can't afford top branded trainers or old ladies trusting confidence tricksters because they are wearing smart suits, it's wrong to judge people by what they look like. It's a weakness on our part if we judge by appearances. I'm sorry to say that, even in the Church, too many people pay attention to worldly status. Some people are deferred to because they have prestigious jobs or because they are relatively wealthy or because they have some honourable position in the community. We are all equal in the sight of God and, as Christians, the people of God, we too ought to value everybody equally. We should be equally attentive to their needs, to treat their contributions with equal respect, and, if we can't avoid judging

people, to judge, as Jesus told people who were judging Him, “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment” (John 7<sup>24</sup>).

For if there come into your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment: And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? (James 2<sup>2-4</sup>).

We’ve covered priesthood - its privileges and responsibilities. All baptised Christians are God’s priests with free access to Him through Christ and called by God to offer to Him “ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee” (BCP). There’s nothing special about us ordained folk. We’re set apart to serve God and the Church and the world in our own particular way; and so is every other Christian person. We’ve considered the risk of respecting persons. “If ye fulfil the royal law according to the Scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced<sup>1</sup> of the law as transgressors (James 2<sup>8&9</sup>).

Finally we come to role. As an ordained minister and as Rector of Cuxton and Halling, I do have certain rights and responsibilities – some of them, given that we are an established Church, enshrined in law. Coming back to the shorts question, it has been suggested that they are OK for leisure, but not when I am on duty. That’s not straightforward, however. Rector is what I am, not what I do. What I am, I am all the time. If you need me as Rector at any time, I shan’t tell you to go away and come back when I’m on duty. Conversely, I don’t have set hours of work. If I’m free at any time of day, I might take Tommy for a walk, but, if I meet someone who wants to know how to book a wedding when I’m shopping in the Co-op, I’ll stop to help them.

There is a point that clergy ought to dress so that they are recognised as clergy wherever they are, but that is only tangential to the shorts question. A vicar in a suit, wearing a collar and tie, is no more evidently a minister than a vicar in shorts and tee shirt or a skirt and blouse. I do wonder about that sometimes, though, whether people these days know who I am.

I don’t really see the need to look clerical for social events unless there is a reason to be recognised or I have some official role in the proceedings. I have to confess that I’m not really a party animal (Spock, not Kirk), but I try to enter the spirit of the event, rather than dominate it. I do dress formally for visits on solemn occasions. It’s a matter of judgment (which I can obviously sometimes get wrong) for lighter-hearted matters. When young people come to arrange weddings or christenings, perhaps a little nervous about meeting a clergyman for the first time, it can be helpful to be informal. It’s a matter of sensitivity to what people will find helpful, rather than having fixed procedures or rules. I try to do my pastoral work on the basis that my relationship with people in Cuxton and Halling is ideally based on friendship. I don’t see you as customers or clients. When you come to see me for some reason, it’s not like applying for benefits or arranging insurance or a job interview or asking help from a social worker. I’ll always do what I can to minimise the bureaucracy and to make it possible for you to get what is right for you, not to bury you in paper work, confuse you and make you feel as though you were in an inferior position as a supplicant, rather than as an equal member of the Body of Christ, like me, created in God’s image and redeemed by Christ’s Blood. I have been told that I ought to dress up for meetings and I have wondered whether power dressing would help to impose my authority, but I don’t particularly want to do that. When church meetings go as they should, we’re Christian friends working together in a prayerful atmosphere, seeking God’s Will for the Church today in the light of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church. Such meetings respond to gentle guidance; they don’t need to be dominated. When, however, things go wrong and people do behave badly at meetings, I have learnt, over the years, that there is nothing I can do except get into a fight which nobody can win because we’ve all lost if the unity of the Church is broken. So it’s best to let it go. Being really

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<sup>1</sup> convicted

cynical, I know that there is nothing important church councils can do unless they work with the Rector. So I can afford to wait until people are prepared to listen and to include everybody with equal respect.

And then, as I said, there are robes for public worship. They are normally required by Canon Law. They are not vital. What is vital is that we worship in spirit and in truth. They do, however, mark out those who are called to lead worship, to lead the whole congregation into the Presence of God, to preside at the Sacraments of God's grace and to proclaim His Word. It is a wonderful privilege to be set apart for such work, but it doesn't make me holier or more special or more important than anyone else. All Christians constitute the people of God. All Christians are holy in Christ and in Him alone. All Christians, if not necessarily in these words, inevitably (if we really think about it) pray "And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee".  
Roger.