

Looking around at the congregation I can see many people who have been, or are still are, churchwardens. They are people who have learnt the hard way to suspect any Vicar who approaches them with a disarming smile and asks for a moment of their time. Because what they are told over the next ten minutes is what fun they will have if they become a churchwarden and how it isn't a huge burden. Within weeks of taking on the role, they discover a whole new world of blocked drains, angry hall hirers and the seemingly impossible task of raising funds for essential repairs. But it was not a total lie, for they also discover a deep sense of belonging, of being part of a broad team that serves the church, and they will make many new friends.

This balance between the plusses and the minuses is true of anything that we undertake. Sometimes we are told more in advance about the cost and sometimes more about the gains. Jesus, when talking about being a disciple, does exactly the same:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Wonderful, comforting words! Rather different from:

"If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.

Which is true? The answer is both.

When we make the decision to follow Christ, whether as a member of the congregation, or as a churchwarden or as an ordained minister, and of course today we are celebrating Chris's ordination to the priesthood, we take on the yoke of Christ. It means we know he is always with us, he will guide us. He won't let us stray too far from the straight path, he will ensure that we avoid the hazards, he will make us stop when we are tired, not push us beyond our capabilities. He will make sure we have time for sustenance. And sometimes we will be acutely aware of his presence, of his gentle touch, of him holding us back when we would rush forwards into danger and of him urging us on to do what is right when we are being selfish or lazy. His presence is manifest when we visit someone who is ill or recently bereaved. At such times, although we have no words that can possibly take away the pain, the peace of Christ enters, bringing healing. For the priest, moving from the anguish of death to the joy of a marriage ceremony in a single morning, there is the knowledge that Christ will absorb the pain but also dance in celebration at the wedding, he will not let the sorrow mar the joy.

But the burden of the cross is not light. The cross that we have to bear does not come from Christ, it is not Christ that can make us fall. The cross is the cross of the world. For some the cross is crushingly heavy, for those who are persecuted for their faith, for those forced to choose between the people they love and the way of Christ. For them, the cross is the product of the fear and hatred of others. We, thank God, are not persecuted. Chris, as a priest, is unlikely to martyred here in

Wimbledon – at least I sincerely hope not. But there will be burdens, as there are for all Christians. For we can never be what people want us to be. Their dismay builds our cross.

When I first started out in ministry, I thought that all I needed to know was the bible, how to pray, and how to care for people. I then realised that I needed to know about liturgy and maybe a bit about church history, I needed to know what various theologians thought, and it was quite a good idea to know about heresies so that I could avoid them. I realise now that I am expected to be a fundraiser, to be an expert on ancient buildings and monuments, to be gracious and polite when people ring at odd or inconvenient hours, to love being on committees, and to take responsibility for everything ranging from bonfires in the churchyard to the behaviour of toddlers in the car park. As crosses go, it is not very heavy, yet sometimes it is sufficiently large to crowd out God.

Serving God in whatever capacity brings us closer to him, with all the benefits that implies. But all too often, we are seen not as servants of God, but servants of the church, and that means vastly different things to different people. Is the church the body of Christ or is it a wedding venue? Is the church there to help people know that eternity of love and freedom that is God or is it a concert hall?

If we are to remain true to our calling then we will have crosses thrust upon us, heavy weights that if we are not careful we can mistake for a heavy yoke. Never let us forget the words of Christ:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Read Priestly Duties by Stewart Henderson (this poem is available on the web)