

It's not always the things that you think are going to be difficult that you spend endless hours wrestling with, inexorably adding to the grey hairs on your head and the lines on your face. Sometimes the things that horrify you as you gaze on from the outside you take in your stride; sometimes it is the things you never even knew were there that prove to be the biggest obstacles in your path.

Many marriages founder not in an extra-marital bed, but in the bathroom, after too many years squeezing the toothpaste tube the wrong way. The hardest part of learning to drive is not the gearbox, but keeping your confidence. It's a breeze to keep an eye on which of the three cups the ball is under, though it is never the one you say. How, just how can it be possible to never get the winning numbers when you get to pick six and there's only 49 to choose from?

Just before the dog collar first circled my neck, the thing that really sent me into paroxysms of panic about becoming a priest was the prospect of standing up and preaching: although many a congregation's heart may have sunk subsequently when they have seen me climb into the pulpit, it has proved to be not nearly as petrifying to me as I had imagined. It may not be very good, but it doesn't scare me. The most persistently difficult thing I have found in the ordained ministry turned out to be one that I didn't foresee and perhaps it can best be introduced in the context of a favoured practice of the parish where I was a wet behind the ears curate, the baptism visit.

Defiantly old school, at St Margaret's Leigh on Sea, those intending to trip to the font would receive a visit (or visits if they were really unlucky) from one of the clergy and a member of the congregation. The purpose of the visit was to talk about the faith and the upcoming service, to answer any questions that may have arisen. Aside from occasionally having to fight for parental attention with a football match on a 10 foot flat screen TV or once a 6 foot animatronic Santa, this process was rarely arduous in itself, though of course I can only speak for myself and not for the families involved.

One visit, a year or so in, however, did bring home to me what I had not till that point realised was one of the most difficult parts, for me, of being a priest. On this visit, after the obligatory cup of undrinkable tea was firmly in my grasp and gently scalding my hands the candidate's parents told me that the baby-to-be-baptised's older sister, a pupil at the local church school had become somewhat excited in the past few days. This excitement was caused by the prospect of a home visit from Fr Andrew. Difficult to credit, I know, but apparently true. With hundreds of pupils and only one curate I would have to admit I would not have known who the girl in question was, but she certainly knew who I was, as her mother proceeded, horrifyingly, to elaborate. 'Oh yes' she said 'and we saw you walking down the main road the other day and [name removed to protect the innocent] said 'Look! there's Father Andrew'.

Now you might not be able to understand why this girlish outburst should have been a revelation of such horror to me, but think of it this way. To my mind, there could have been lots of additional clauses to that phrase. Look! there's Father Andrew picking his nose. Look! there's Father Andrew with his dinner down his jumper. Again. Look! there's Father Andrew muttering to himself. It's

certainly a good job I wasn't driving when spotted, or it could well have been Look! there's Father Andrew... waving at us... in a rather peculiar way... and he appears to have lost most of his fingers.... and I know I can't lip read but that's either Aramaic or his language doesn't appear to be very Christian...

This recognisability is not because I have a fabulously memorable face: it could be a worse mug, but it's the dog collar that is usually recognised rather than me *per se*. If you don't believe me, I can assure you that several of you sat here this morning have happily walked straight past me when I've not dressed the part, and indeed have moved quickly off looking worried when I've been about to say hello. And no, I don't go out sporting a false moustache and blonde wig.

Anyway, stop whining you might say, being recognisable is part of the job description. The dog collar is not there, as some maintain, to remind clergy that they are now on the Lord's leash. A priest is called not only to be a shepherd, or perhaps better, sheepdog, of a christian community, but to be a visible expression of it: when they see me, they are supposed to see you. That is why, the canons of the Church of England insist, leisure time apart, a priest must be recognisably such at all times, hence the collars and the sober and ever-fashionable (and bonus of bonuses slimming) black.

*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him... And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light...*

There should, our Church says, be one person at least in each and every parish whose uniform day in day out will bear witness to the startling fact 'the light has come into the world'. Not that that person will necessarily be a beacon of light by their scrupulous behaviour or palpable piety, though that would be a bonus if so often an aspirational one. That person should be recognisably an expression of the local Christian community, not to draw attention to herself (and most priests don't really bear great personal scrutiny), but to draw attention to Christ. The priest in a dog collar is nothing more than a sandwich-board carrier for the faith.

Now you might be thinking at this point, that, even by the Rector's standards this is perhaps a little self-obsessed. Clergy banging on about themselves again. There we go: it's all about me. Well here comes the scary bit. What I've been saying is not actually about me at all: it's all about you.

Let me take you back to the words of our gospel this morning. They should be ringing fresh in your memory as it is scant minutes ago you last heard them. We don't need to be reminded of all of it but just this bit:

*Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out in pairs.*

Later on he sends out seventy, and eventually, just before he ascends into heaven, all of his disciples. If we are to be disciples of Jesus as what that means extends a whole lot of a way further than coming most Sundays to this building, important though that is.

If we think the existence of the patsy in the collar lets every one else off the hook, think again. There is no point in having someone being a visible expression of a community if the rest of the community is out the back having a cup of tea and a fag break. All Christians are called by the example of our lives to shine a light on the world. How that plays out may not be as instantly obvious as the white plastic round my neck, but it should be visible to anyone who looks. After all, lights hidden under baskets may as well not be lit at all.

To shine with the light of Christ is not to be perfect. Leave that to the plaster saints. Nor is it to be shouting and condemning through a megaphone. Leave that to Amos. Nor is it to be poking round the refuse of our brothers and sisters lives looking for malevolent motes. Leave that to Satan. We do not need to condemn. In the brilliant light of Christ, the world condemns itself. You can no more blame the mirror for the bags under your eyes or the spots on your forehead than a do-gooding Christian for your own sins, though of course, many do. To shine with the light of Christ is to shine a light on the world by our recognition of the coming of Christ, by our love for Jesus, and by our desire to lives worthy of his name; by our generosity, by our welcome, by our eagerness, by our love.

Perhaps you may balk at what Jesus asks you to do; perhaps you may fear being sent out like a lamb among wolves; perhaps you feel your flame is too feeble; stuttering, easily extinguished by the lightest of winds, that you, of all people, are hopelessly insufficient for the task. Welcome to my world.

The moon has no light of its own, yet it shines brightly none the less, lighting up the night, shining with the reflected brilliance of the sun. And so dear Christian brother and sister it is with us, shining with the mirrored radiance of Our Lord. If the surfaces of our personal worlds are cratered and battered, it matters not one jot: that light still shines.