

St Mary Maldon
26th February 2020.
Ash Wednesday
7.30pm Mass

The college where I trained as a teacher was very keen on having themed discos on a Saturday night.

The ones where you were supposed to wear fancy dress.

The most popular one was a pyjama dance as they called it.

Where the young people dressed in pyjamas.

A young teacher I knew worked in a local primary school and he decided to go to one of these pyjama dances.

As a young single male teacher there were obvious attractions there.

So he dressed up in his pyjamas and asked a friend to give him a lift to the college and arranged for him to pick him up later.

He walked into the hall full of anticipation.

But he got a shock.

There was indeed a disco there.

But it was not a fancy dress one, it had been changed.

The friend who had driven him there had left.

There were no mobile phones in those days.

So he had to walk home through the town in his pyjamas.

He told me he had never felt so embarrassed in his life.

He felt everyone was looking at him and laughing at him.

And they probably were.

Seven years ago in the cathedral I was ordained deacon in Chelmsford Cathedral.

The first time I had worn a clerical shirt and collar.

No problem there, I was surrounded by other people in the same dress.

But the following day, Monday morning I had to venture onto the streets of Maldon wearing a clerical shirt and collar.

And I felt just like my friend who had walked through the streets in his pyjamas.

It was a hot day in June so I couldn't cover myself up with scarves and coats.

I had to examine my conscience as to why I felt this was.

It was of course partly a feeling of unworthiness.

Who am I that I should be marked out as a church leader?

And I thought other people would be saying, "Who does he think he is?"

So a feeling of unworthiness.

But then that was mixed up with that a feeling of guilt.

I should be pleased to have the opportunity to show people that I am a Christian by wearing a badge of office but I am not feeling that way so what does that say about me?

I spoke to Fr Robert about it and he reassured me that my mixed feelings were very prevalent amongst new ordinands and I shouldn't beat myself up about it.

What about You?

In a few minutes I am going to put ash on your foreheads.

You will walk out of here with a large black cross on your head.

Everyone you see will know you have been to church.

Everyone you see will know you are declaring yourself a Christian.

Last year at Heybridge, Asa, the vicar mixed oil with the ash so the cross was more distinctive.

And some people told me it didn't wash off very easily so they were marked as a Christian for days.

When they went to work or to the shops.

How would you feel if the cross didn't wash off?

Would you feel like my friend in his pyjamas or me with my new clerical shirt, or would you be better than that and be proud to be seen as a Christian.

It might be a change to talk about your faith.

Tell others the good news.

Be a witness to the faith.

I, in fact, soon found that wearing my collar meant that others did talk to me and ask questions and did accept me for what I was so my problems dissolved. You might find that with the cross on your forehead.

Now if we read the Gospel it might seem to contradict what I am saying.

I am saying we shouldn't be afraid to declare our faith.

We shouldn't hide away like my friend in his pyjamas.

You shouldn't be like I was when I first put on a clerical shirt.

We should let it be known that we are people of faith.

But the Gospel is telling us we should be doing three things, pray, fast and give alms.

The three legged stool of our Lenten discipline.

But Jesus is saying we should be doing them in private, yet we have come to a public service to be marked with a cross.

What Jesus is talking about is our motive.

If the reason we pray, fast and give alms is to impress others, to show them how good we are and perhaps to show we are better than them, then our motive is wrong.

There should be only one motive for what we do, love.

Love of God and love of others.

We come to church this evening not to impress, but to meet God and strengthen our relationship with him.

We give alms to show our love for other people.

We fast to help us be spiritually aware and strengthen our relationship with God.

We pray so we can be with the God who we love and who loves us.

So worship, almsgiving, fasting and prayer, our motive should be love not to impress others.

And if this is our motive surely we should want to share our faith with others.

In six week's time we will recall Jesus dying on the cross.

He did that for love of us.

As we begin Lent we are invited to look at the intentions of our hearts.

We enter the school of love, so that we can learn to love like him.