

Vicki was bright and articulate and faithful,
an ordinand of the greatest promise.
As her ordination drew near
her mother,
thrilled by all that lay ahead for her daughter,
made robes for her herself,
stoles, an alb, a cotta,
days and nights of painstaking work, stitching by hand.

The completed robes were carefully packed in a special bag
which Vicki accidentally left on the Arriva train
when she changed at Crewe
on her journey to her title parish in Manchester.

Repeated calls to Lost Property proved fruitless,
not helped by the staff there being clueless

as to what on earth
four stoles, and alb and a cotta looked like.
Maybe the train's guard purloined them,
spending secret evenings on terra firma
where he discards his whistle and green flag,
strips off his railway uniform
dons Vicki's robes
and plays churches,
a latter day St Alban
dressing up as a priest,
I think the correct theological term is cross-dressing.

Whatever,
the whole episode has a tremendous poignancy.
Vicki's mother's acts of devotion
points to the sacrifice of those

who have robed us for ministry

some with actual robes,

others figuratively so,

robing us with their faith, their finance,

their vision, their love.

And the loss of those robes

has echoes of Christ voluntarily stripping off his robes

for a tender act of service on Maundy Thursday

as he stooped to wash his disciples' feet.

Then having his robes forcibly ripped off

on Good Friday

for a costly act of service

which freed up the whole world,

watched by his mother, who'd robed him with such love,

a sword piercing her heart.

And the loss for us

speaks of all the myriad missed opportunities

for ministry and mission,

times when we'll be not worthy of the robes,

or times when our servant ministry been stolen from us,

denied us

when the world and even the Church

deems our robes to be too shabby

and passes us by for a more glittering show.

Moving from Vicki's beginning to a Vicar's end,

After my dad died

we cleared his house of all his stuff.

All the clothes in black bin bags

destined for the Age Concern shop.

But then, what to do with his robes,

worn out by five decades of ministry.

The Canons of the Church of England

offered no guidance whatsoever.

Would the charity shop put them on their rail,

a surplice for 50p snapped up by a pensioner

grateful to wrap it round herself

to ward off Scarborough's North Sea chill?

Or would they be too worn to sell?

Who'd want to buy a Lichfield hood worn out by Evensong?

Whatever you send to a charity shop is never wasted,

even the tattiest clothes are sold on as rags.

But I couldn't do that with my dad's robes,

robes unto rags didn't seem right.

So I planned to burn them at dawn on the beach,

reminiscent of another fire 2000 years back

on Galilee's beach at Eastertide.

Since the land between high and low tide

is owned by the Crown,

it seemed right for these robes of a minister of the Crown

to end their days there,

or at least that would have been my excuse

had anyone challenged me.

When it came to the crunch, I bottled out.

I feared it might look more than a tad suspicious.

'Allo 'allo, 'allo what have we here, burning clothes are we?'

Would the forensic tests identify

all the tears from all the funerals

in the purple stole's fibres, some particularly strong:

the tears of a mother at the funeral of her toddler daughter,

mowed down by the squire's wife, too drunk to drive a car?

And the white stole,
all the pheromones absorbed
from countless nervous couple's hands
accompanied by those words which always make me cry,
'I pronounce that they be man and wife together
in the name of the Father,
and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost'
And the alb,
drenched in water which had cascaded off the heads
of all those babies baptised,
including one prem baby late December back in '63,
born too soon, just two pounds in weight and doomed to die,
until she licked the baptismal water
running down her face
and Matron realised they had a fighter on their hands.
What a lady, what a night!

Never mind the water marks.
What about all that blood,
microscopic splashes from mass after mass?
The Police would have had no more religious sensibilities
than that lost property office at Crewe.
'Sarge, we've got a mass-murderer on our hands here!'
Surely they would have locked me up
and thrown away the key,
me lingering in some North Yorkshire dungeon,
until that nice Boris Johnson intervened
and they doubled my sentence.

And what of Jesus' robes,
laid aside twice in his final 24 hours,
what would forensic tests on them reveal?
The spittle from Roman soldiers and high priests,

the blood from the scourging and crown of thorns,
terrible Good Friday stains.

Not to mention

the enforced stripping of his own robe,
forced to wear the robe of another,
an alien purple robe,
the dress of kingly privilege,
not Christ's cut at all.

Redolent of the boy David, my namesake,
having the weighty robes of the men of war
thrust upon him,
when he simply needed to be himself
to take on Goliath,
as Christ simply needed to be himself
to take on the Goliath of sin and death.

But present on Christ's Maundy Thursday robes
would be genetic traces
of Legion and Lepers,
Jairus' daughter and the Widow of Nain's son,
the blind and the deaf,
the paralytic and the epileptic,
the woman who had bled for 12 years,
who touched his robe and was cured.

*And that a higher gift than grace
should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence and his very self,
and essence all divine.*

Robes riddled with the stuff of incarnation.

St Paul bids us to put on Christ,

to wear Christ,
to don his robes.
And we do,
hardly giving a thought
to the ministry our robes stand for,
the ministry our robes absorb.
Until now,
as we think on Christ laying aside his robes
on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday,
realising not that the apparel makes the man,
but that Christ makes the apparel,
as the Son of Man
who calls us
not to be served
but to serve
shines through.

Thank you for wearing Christ,
thank you for being worn by Christ,
in every sense of the word, wear!
I know how glorious ministry can be
and how difficult ministry can be,
a seemingly never-ending,
hard, unyielding slog.

And yet at the same time a whole lifetime's ministry
rushes by in the twinkling of an eye.
It doesn't seem a minute since
my robes were fresh and unused,
with me pitying the clergy widow
who tried to foist
her husband's yellowing Cambridge hood upon me.

Seemingly a moment later
it is my new hood which is yellowing and worn.
Our robes make us realise that ministry
is just a moment,
a marvellous moment
in God's eternity.
God bless your marvellous moment.

Back to where we started
with Vicki ordained priest in 2008
with borrowed robes,
decades of ministry ahead of her.
But seemingly just a moment later
she'll be knock, knock, knocking
on heaven's door
greeted by Christ,

with four fresh stoles,
a fresh alb,
a fresh cotta
over his arm
and curiously
a guard's whistle around his neck.
'What kept you?' I imagine him smiling.

'You did,'
I can imagine sparky Vicki replying.
As I hope we will all reply.
'You kept me,
it was you who kept me,
Christ.'
Kept by Christ for ever.