

Leading the Church – Don't shoot the Rector!

It was in June 2010 that I first encountered the Reverend Adam Smallbone. Adam had moved from a small rural parish in Suffolk to become the new vicar of St Saviour in the Marshes, a struggling church in the East End of London. Here he battled with the daily challenges of ministry, falling congregations, a financial crisis, a series of moral and pastoral challenges and where he often struggled to make sense of his call and faith.

Of course Adam doesn't exist! He is in fact the creation of James Wood (the writer) and Tom Hollander (the star) of the BBC television comedy 'Rev'. The first series of which I particularly found both amusing and real – and a far more honest portrayal of Christian ministry than that of the clergy in 'Emmerdale', 'Dibley' or that other East End parish 'Walford'.

What was particularly refreshing about 'Rev' was that he was human, vulnerable, struggling, often out of his depth, yet ultimately faithful. Though some of the characters in the series are clearly intended as stereotypical comedy characters (the Archdeacon from hell for example) – there is enough truth about them to offer a reasonably accurate portrait of parish ministry today. The storylines often bordered on drama as well as comedy and offered a glimpse of the broad spectrum of parish life and work and of the challenges faced by the church and its appointed leaders.

So what is it that a minister requires to serve a parish in these days? There is of course no one model of priest or parish. Clergy, like parishes, come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and 'flavours', and they too face the problems of maintaining congregations, supporting deanery and diocese, engaging with the community, facing financial challenges, moral issues and pastoral crises, and the challenge of proclaiming the changeless gospel message in an ever changing world. On the whole they are I believe (I am biased of course!) some of the most hard-working, caring, thoughtful and often misunderstood men and women in contemporary society.

In his book 'Going to Church' Bishop John Pritchard describes the clergy in the following ways:

'They are called by a vision which is so breathtaking it is almost embarrassing to articulate. They see life in the raw, often stepping into places of pain and darkness where others fear to go. They are sacrificial and altruistic, work long hours, are permanently on call, have no contract of employment. They are physicians of the heart and poets of the soul as well as technicians of the church. They grapple with the biggest issues, but still have to keep the photocopier working. Their role is to pray and ponder, love and teach, train and organize, lead worship, trouble-shoot, encourage the fallen, support the weak, visit the sick, and fall asleep in front of the television – and the pay is lousy! They are sadly misunderstood.'

This sounds very arduous, especially as everyone knows we only work one day a week! The reality is that we serve a loving God, and are ordained by the power of the Holy Spirit and of course we have the wonderful example and teaching of Jesus to follow. The problem is that sometimes people confuse us with Jesus – and sometimes we confuse ourselves as we overreach our human capabilities. But there is great joy in just being there, loving and living with the people we are called to serve and trying to introduce or encourage the development of God's kingdom values on earth.

One of my favourite bits of 'Rev' were the scenes where we saw Adam grappling with God in prayer – hanging on to faith at difficult times by his fingernails – yet often finding his prayers are answered. It happens to me too!

Yours in Christ,
Reverend John, your Rector.