

“The Outer Robe”

As I look back to that day in November 1998 when I took my seat in this Cathedral as bishop I have two regrets about that service.

Firstly, I wish I had asked for each parish to send two children to the service to witness the child who welcomed me at the West Door with the words: *“Bishop James, remember what Jesus said ‘unless you become like a child you cannot enter the Kingdom of God’*. After which, I knelt to pray before processing on my own in a simple rochet through collegiate seating in the Nave, proceeding to the Throne then onwards to the High Altar, and along the way being clad grandly with “the outer robe” of the Cope and Crosier and Mitre.

Which brings me to my second regret.

I wish now that I had begun with cope and mitre and then throughout the service divested myself of them. For if a bishop is meant to be in some way an icon of Christ then such a liturgical movement might have expressed more vividly *“He did not count equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself”*.

The poetry and potency of this New Testament anthem can be ruined by too much theological prodding! We’ve all done our essays on Kenotic Theory and examined the meaning of “emptying”! But at this moment in my life and ministry I find the plainest meaning of this image speaks to my heart.

As I contemplate ceasing to be Bishop of Liverpool, as I imagine handing back the Crosier and taking off the Cathedral Cope and Mitre for the last time I am conscious of the emptying that comes with the vacating of the See of Liverpool, with the vacating and resigning of my office. I am under no illusion that giving up being Bishop of Liverpool means a loss of status and authority both in the church and in the world.

This is not unique to bishops. I’ve listened privately to politicians speaking movingly about leaving ministerial office, and the film “The Full Monty” exposed the human wreckage that comes from forced redundancy and unemployment.

But I’ve chosen this passage and theme deliberately this day as we take stock of our calling to minister to others and of our Lord’s mandate in John 13 that we should love and minister to one another.

Those who were in Deanery Chapters 15 years ago may remember that I came to each and expounded the example of Jesus, who was both washed and washed giving us an example of mutual ministry.

It is also a story of divesting and emptying. Explicitly we’re told by John he “got up from the table (and) took off his outer robe”.

Standing down as Bishop of Liverpool feels like taking off the outer robe.

Here is a conundrum of our call to ministry, to ministerial office – our calling to minister in the church involves assuming power and authority and it’s expressed in the robes with which we are clad. Be it deacon, priest or bishop it is the robe, the vestment that differentiates us from the people of God the laity.

At the Diocesan Synod I spoke about how the church began as a movement and ended up as an institution. I stated that the challenge was to find how we could recover movement to the institution. The power and authority of office are some of the inevitable trappings of an institution.

How do we recover to and refresh our calling to serve uncorrupted by the status and power of our position? Are we even aware of those dimensions in the exercise of our ministry? If we are not, then that is a more telling sign than if we are.

That is why in my more spiritual moments I am looking forward to standing down. It's not that I'm tired or ill. With what I call my 50,000 miles service of operations I've seldom felt fitter and in meetings with colleagues my mind is still brimming with ideas. But with this energy physical, mental and spiritual I shall soon know ministry without "the outer robe", having emptied myself of the temporalities of the Bishopric.

And on this day I invite us all to contemplate "the outer robe" and to ask ourselves what it looks like in our own ministry and to ponder whether we wear it all the time and what we would look like and what we would do differently and how we would then be in relation to others if we were to abandon, to take off "the outer robe" of our office.

But I don't want you to think entirely negatively about "the outer robe" of office. After all, Jesus put it back on "after he had washed their feet" before he "returned to the table".

There are positive aspects of the symbol of office. I often make the point to the Mayors at the ecumenical church leaders annual Civic Reception. I say to them. *"When you go somewhere on an official visit and people get excited about you coming, part of you wants to say "Look, don't get too excited, it's only me. In one sense that's right. In another, it's completely wrong. Because when you go in role, in the office you inhabit (albeit temporarily) it's not just you, you take with you in that moment the whole community that you represent as Mayor."*

Similarly, as a vicar or bishop we inhabit a role and with that "outer robe" bring huge affirmation to people. I have to confess that it has been one of the lovely aspects of the office of Bishop that I enjoy – going to be with people and by virtue of bearing the office being an instrument of their affirmation. It is a privilege. So, "the outer robe" has a place. But never forget it is an "outer robe" and must never be confused with the inner person.

Maundy Thursday is the day for the inner person to disrobe of the trappings of office however blessed they may be to follow Christ to his knees, to "take off the outer robe" and to come "Just as I am". So let me ask – when you come forward to receive the Sacrament why don't we consciously leave "the outer robe" in our seats. Come as you truly are. Retrace your steps and rewind the film to that day before you were ordained, before you were licensed, collated, inducted or installed. And don't put "the outer robe" back on until you have let him wash you
wash you with his tears
wash you with his sweat
wash you with his blood
wash you with his cries of forgiveness
wash you with his love
Then when "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven" put back on the robe of office – but remember, only temporarily.