

Address: Licensing of the Rev Dr Julia Candy at St Clement's Church, and St James' Church, Aberdeen.

As I begin I must firstly thank Canon Ken Gordon and Canon Ruth Edwards who respectively have been Acting Priests in Charge of the congregations of St Clement's and St James'.

By a wonderful grace of providence their time in these posts has not been long but to each, and for what each has done, I am truly grateful.

Today is a good occasion for Julia, for St Clement's, for St James' and for the Diocese.

When Julia came for interview back in early November only her husband, vicar, her bishop and those of us interviewing her knew of this.

Against this given anonymity it stands to her considerable credit that Julia then accepted my invitation to join our diocesan clergy and lay readers at their annual conference.

Clearly what she encountered amongst them wasn't such as to put her off coming, and indeed I dare to think those whom she met might actually have encouraged her. Quite right too!

Quite a number of the clergy and lay readers here tonight were at that conference and will recall Michael Harvey, the prime mover of the 'back to church Sunday' campaign offer two important images.

One concerns the new priest coming to a congregation, or congregations.

The other concerns the congregation or congregations receiving a new cleric. Let me deal with each in turn.

So then the priest coming, anew, to his or her congregations. Michael Harvey in an hilarious session at the conference describe, with no apologies for exaggeration, the new priest as his or her licensing service.

The new priest is sitting there, or standing, taking a good and calculating look at everything. And just pondering what can be moved ... that flower vase, those chairs, a sneaky peek at the candle sticks or maybe a hymn book table, any of which might be perceived to be in the wrong position and so on.

And the about-to-be-priest in charge having had a good look at things says inwardly "I'm going to move that paschal candle, or that set of leaflets, or whatever". And when no one's around, does so.

This is when the first law of ecclesiastical thermo-dynamics takes effect.

Namely that having moved whatever-it-was somehow, and by some means the next time the priest is in the church whatever-it-was has moved back to where it was originally.

The action of moving whatever-it-is is repeated. And as sure as anything 'it' returns to where it began.

Now by this time the first diagnosis of ecclesiastical paranoia can be made and is summed up in the mutual recrimination, 'Who's doing that?' and so on, with everyone else around beginning to groan and get anxious.

My former seminary principal once said to us as ordinands that when you go somewhere and you see a stick in a field you don't pull it out and take it away. You find out what the stick is for and why it was there. To do that you need to ask people simple questions.

Likewise when I was once in the cast of an outdoor passion play the townies in the cast were astounded when those of us from the country, which once upon a time I was, picked up the rocks that we had used for part of the set in rehearsals and put them back where we had found them at the edge of the field.

Julia, you may – or you might not have – cast your eye about here to see what you can move. My counsel is don't!

The very fact that you are here will create more shock waves than ever you will realize.

Get to know the people of the congregations. Visit them in their homes. Learn their life stories, their problems, joys, hopes, sadnesses, their epiphanies of God and learn of and learn from their faith in God.

There are some wonderful people here. And be reassured that once you've got their trust you won't need to move the flower vases because other and more important things will then begin. The second law of ecclesiastical thermo dynamics will operate. Things will moving of their own accord: God will be doing it.

Faith will deepen, new dimensions will open up as possibilities rather than as challenges or problems, new and open ways of praying will emerge, there will be a new confidence in liturgy and – this is the harder task – God's call to St Clement's and St James' to live as missional churches will expand.

And what of the second thing I referred to earlier, namely the congregations receiving their new priest. Michael Harvey's image for this was the 'flat pack priest'!

You know what it's like. You go to the furniture store and you want a cupboard, let's say. You choose the one you like and can afford. It'll be just right you think. With eager anticipation you pay for it. You collect it, or get someone to pick it up for you and then you realize the first problem.

It's not yet a cupboard. Why? Because it's still in flat pack. It's got to be assembled. Put together. So, hopeful – but with perhaps a hint of foreboding – if you're female you look at

the instructions. If you're male you'll think you don't need to.

Either way, and without any hint of gender bias on my part you find the instructions aren't quite up to your level of cognition or awareness. But you begin to get there, identifying what goes where and how it all works.

And then the inevitable problem arises. That's when you find that not all the bits are there. Or they were there, but having mistaken item 'a' for item 'b' (the instructions not being clear enough) you've put things in the wrong place. Made the wrong assumptions. Not quite got it right, even if you thought you had, and even if there wasn't anything wrong with the instructions. I hope the metaphor is clear.

Flat pack priest. Are there any bits missing? Did we read the instructions properly? Do we think there are a few things in the wrong place.

Now, if anyone from either congregation is saying to him or herself I'm going to make that priest according to what I want then let me dispel that notion from you right now.

This priest comes very highly specified and with five star credentials. This is not a flat pack priest who comes in a box ready to be put together, according to your preferences, irrespective whether the bits are there or not. Nor is there a precise instruction manual.

Things are much more organic and God-inspired.

Together, people and priest, the whole body, needs building up according to the will of Christ, individually and corporately. All of you together. As a consequence cherished dreams may need rethought. Much loved patterns from the past might need refashioning. The daunting and the unfamiliar will need to be sought and explored.

In all of this the whole body of Christ will grow up into a spiritual body making the kingdom of God more real in our midst.

And so I say to all of you: support one another, resource one another, encourage one another, challenge one another even, and as you flourish together under God enjoy the growing pains.

For as surely as you do this you will please the Lord who in our midst tonight wills that this should be so.

To His glory be it. Amen.

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