

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## I Was a Stranger

*The Rev. J. Michael Povey*

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Matthew 25: 35b)

In 1991, I was blessed to take a sabbatical leave from St. Stephen's in Pittsfield, MA, where I was the rector.

I hung my hat at St. Luke's on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, GA, there to learn much about urban ministry. I also took three courses at the Interdenominational Centre at Atlanta University, a consortium of seminaries of historic black churches.

My studies included courses on “Black People in the Bible” and “An Overview of Historic Black Churches,” as well as a terrific course on preaching taught by Dr. Henry Mitchell.

Dr. Mitchell was slated to preach one Sunday at Beulah Baptist Church in Decatur, so I took myself there to hear him. I arrived a bit late, wearing a clerical collar, as I had presided at the 8:00 a.m. Eucharist at St. Luke's earlier that morning.

We latecomers were held in a foyer whilst the minister prayed the long Pastoral Prayer. A member of the church approached me and said, “When this prayer is ended, you will go up onto the platform and join the other ministers.” I protested, saying that I'd be happy to sit with the congregation. She fixed me with “a look” and said, “When this prayer is over, you *will* go up to the platform and join the other ministers.” I knew better than to fight with a “mother of the Church.”

The senior pastor welcomed me and found out a little bit about me during the hymn which followed the Pastoral Prayer. At announcement time, he introduced me as if I were a long-lost friend of the church, which was true so far as he was concerned. And, of course, I was smothered with welcomes at the fellowship hour after service.

As I drove home, all I could think was, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” I resolved to “go and do likewise.”

Thereafter, whenever I spotted a cleric during the Eucharist, I would, at the Peace, ask her or him to join me and the other ministers at the Lord's Table for the Great Thanksgiving. I never asked once about denominational affiliation, for that seemed irrelevant. The late Bishop Alexander Stewart of Western Massachusetts was once asked if a Presbyterian minister might join in the laying on of hands at the ordination of a priest. “Certainly” he said. “He cannot take anything away, and he will probably add something.” I felt that way when Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal ministers joined me at the altar.

In June 2006, I retired from my cure at St. James's, Cambridge, MA, and moved to Sarasota in southwest Florida. With the admonition of Bishop Gayle Harris of Massachusetts not to “re-engage too quickly” in my mind, I remained anonymous for the first year. I would “do the 8:00 creep” and slip into a parish at 7:59 a.m., leaving immediately after receiving communion. But the time came when I was refreshed and ready to engage in some more parish ministry.

I knew that the Diocese of Southwest Florida is awash with retired clerics, and I also suspected that this is not always good news for “retirement dioceses.” So I was joyfully surprised when Bishop Dabney T. Smith welcomed me with open arms and a warm heart, and promptly licensed me to officiate. I was also greatly surprised by the warmth of the welcome I received from local rectors. There is a wonderful spirit of welcoming collegiality in this neck of the Episcopal woods.

That welcoming spirit is generally present in congregations where I have been asked to supply. At one, I posed as a stranger and attended a week early “in civvies” to spy out the land. With a bit of reverse class prejudice, I had thought that this congregation in the wealthiest area near Sarasota would be cold and stuffy. Not a bit of it. I discovered instead a warm, joyous, and welcoming people.

There have been a couple of exceptions. In one parish, the usher was engaged in conversation with two parishioners and handed me a bulletin without even looking at me. In another, a woman grabbed my arm and steered me to the guest book with the words, “Our rector tells us that we *must* get visitors to sign this.”

This stranger has been welcomed indeed. But, of course, hospitality is about more than the friendliness of the congregation and rector. There are other ways in which we offer visitors the gift of welcome. It does not help when the bulletin announces something such as, “If you want to help with the chicken barbecue, please see Fred.” A visitor doesn’t know a thing about Fred, and the absence of a last name and phone number makes it clear that the announcement is for the “in crowd.” And I have found that congregations have their own little ceremonies, e.g., holding hands when singing a favorite song, which means nothing to strangers and will leave them feeling left out. It’s good to explain these ceremonies for the benefit of visitors. And I’ll be didactic by adding, “Don’t tell people where coffee hour takes place. Nominate a parishioner each week to take visitors to coffee.” Welcome does not end after the service has begun.

It also helps to create a spirit of welcome if preachers do not launch into their sermon before the congregation has had a chance to be seated. There is no hurry, and it’s so comforting to members and visitors alike to be given a moment to settle into the pew before the sermon begins. The same holds true regarding the administration of Communion. Sometimes the lines lag, and some good person will rush to the rail sensing that the Communion ministers are in a hurry. In one parish, a Sunday or two ago, an older parishioner using a walker was trying to walk full tilt to the rail. I whispered, “Don’t hurry; I’m not going anywhere.” I wanted him to be as relaxed at the Lord’s Table as I am.

I conclude by noting that I’ve driven home from four of the five parishes that I have visited in Southwest Florida with Jesus’ words in my ears and heart. For that, Bishop Smith should be glad.



Michael Povey is from a working class home in Bristol, England. He is one of nine children, and his eight siblings live in England.

He was raised in the Plymouth Brethren, and became an Anglican when he was 26 years old. He trained for ordained ministry at St. John’s College, Nottingham, U.K., was made deacon in June 1976 at Bristol Cathedral in the U.K., and was priested in December 1976 at the Church of the Good Shepherd, Fitchburg, MA.

He enjoyed 30 years of parish ministry in Massachusetts and is now retired and living in Sarasota, FL. He supplies in various local congregations, is a volunteer chaplain, and serves as laundryman at a day shelter for homeless people.

His mantra is, “There is no secular world.”

