

Particular characters and places mark stages of a ministry.

How could I forget Harry, from when I was a curate at St Peter's Plymouth? And I learnt a good deal about the media too.

As a parish, we had been involved in some inner-city regeneration work and the local press wanted to interview me – I was quite flattered by the attention. They asked me a few questions about regeneration, and then slipped in quite innocently (seemingly) a question about prostitution. Now the parish had a couple of streets behind Union Street where that trade took place (and may well still). I said it wasn't really a problem, but what was interesting was a sort of part-time prostitution. If someone needed something, for example a new sofa, that's how they might earn a bit of extra money.

I thought nothing of it, until a few days later in the *Plymouth Herald* there was a headline in the middle pages: "Sex for sofa mums, says local vicar". I was a bit embarrassed, the congregation were amused, the incumbent (luckily) was amused. The only person who wasn't was Harry, the verger. Unbeknownst to me, they had recently taken delivery of a new sofa, and he was worried for his wife.

More concerningly, the former Bishop of Crediton (now Bishop of London), celebrating a Eucharist for SWMTC where I worked as Dean of Studies before St Thomas, called the altar corporal 'the white flappy thing' and was a little uncertain what to do with it.

Ministry is extraordinary, and that's because people are extraordinary. You can't reduce them to statistics or generalities or strategies because they are unique. And they are extraordinary and unique because God is, because there is something of God in each of us, and something of God's love in each of us. People are different to one another, and often the Church finds it difficult to celebrate that difference, and prefers to try and make us all more similar.

That is why what I might call a 'St Thomas theology' is so important – being open to questions, being open to challenges, being prepared to be surprised. Being able to say in the end to Jesus: 'My Lord and my God' in all things.

The Parish of St Thomas is extraordinary; and I've learnt much more about difference and how to love it, and how to love God. When I was being shown round here, I saw the Rectory. You will probably remember the vast garden, but there is also a vast bedroom which a previous vicar called the ballroom. The parish was vast too – it all felt a bit difficult: impossible house, impossible garden, impossible parish. And then I met you all.

I recalled the advice given to a colleague in similar circumstances: Just start, and it doesn't really matter where, but do something. And that's what I've tried to do. I am sorry we have not got further with the building here, but there have been some timely and major repairs, and some good plans to take it forward. I am pleased that the Church is still at the heart of the local community, and works well in partnership with others – that's for everyone's benefit. Personally, I am very grateful that amid the shenanigans of the Church of England nationally, the parish has kept my feet on the ground, and kept reminding me of the value of prayer, worship and faithfulness. That's a great gift, an extraordinary gift, so thank you.

Not that I don't have one or two odder snapshots in the St Thomas album to take away with me. You may remember my comment at Midnight Mass last year, that sometime in December I had walked past a house in Clarence Rd to notice a very skimpily-dressed young man standing at the window smoking a joint – I really didn't know where to look.

It's towards this wonderful array of human beings, this medley of community experience, that the Church offers baptism.

There is a story told of an Anglican lady with a large hat pointing at the font in the Cathedral, and announcing portentously: 'This is where you become a member of the Church of England'. No, definitely not. This is where you are affirmed as one of God's beloved children, for ever and always; and your family, they too are loved and affirmed. So particularly at times of local, national and international uncertainty and anxiety, those of you being baptised today, Reuben and Karis, both infant and adult, offer to our community a gift; a gift of hope and love, the remembrance of new life, and the promise of resurrection. And we are grateful.

Amen