

CIVIC SERVICE: RIGHT OR WRONG?

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The other Sunday, as part of our centennial celebrations, we put on a civic service. The Lord Lieutenant of the County as also the High Sheriff was there. So too were the Mayor and Mayoress, and the local MP. The chairman of the County Council and the leader of the Borough Council likewise turned up – and a host of other councillors. It was really quite a ‘do’.

The deacons rose to the occasion. With just one exception, every male deacon put on a suit for the day – while the female deacons eschewed their jeans and instead turned out in elegant dress.

The church too rose to the occasion. Everybody was in their seat 15 minutes before the service (such a miracle has never taken place before in our church!), so that when I led our distinguished guests into the ‘Meeting Place’ (as we term our worship area), the congregation rose in their honour as our guests found seats which had been reserved for them at the front.

As is our custom, I began the service by welcoming everybody. I went on then to identify and welcome the oldest member of the church (not oldest in years, but the person who had been in continuance membership of the church for the longest), a sprightly 79 year old. And finally I went on to give a personal welcome to each of our distinguished guests.

Thereupon the service began. We sang two great traditional hymns (‘Praise my soul the King of heaven’ and ‘To God be the glory’), as also a new hymn especially composed for the occasion. We sang songs, including the children’s action song, ‘Our God is a great big God’ – it was great to see the Lord Lieutenant and the High Sheriff doing the actions. There was dancing by our ‘Girls of God’, an entertaining monologue by one of my lady deacons, who looked splendid in her Edwardian outfit; a moving (in every sense of the word) Gospel Choir rendition; a brief video featuring our service to the community today; and of course a sermon by our guest preacher, David Coffey, pointing us to the future. It was indeed a great occasion. Certainly our distinguished guests were effusive in their thanks for being invited to this service.

But, and here we come to the nub, were we right to make a song and dance of our special guests? As a member of the leadership team said to me afterwards, “I only wore a suit to please you, Paul!” Didn’t James have something to say about making a fuss of the rich and the powerful (Jas 2.1-4)? True, we were not acting to the detriment of the poor and the weak. But did our welcome to our distinguished guests blur the good news that God has no favourites? I am reminded of an Anglican minister who, at his carol service, refused to reserve any seats for members of the local council on the ground that “God treats everyone on the same basis” (Acts 10.34). By celebrating our centenary with a civic service did we lose our radical Gospel edge? Answers on a postcard to the editor!