

*Sermon preached by Bishop Richard at the licensing of the Revd Kelvin Price as Priest-in-Charge and Rector designate of the parishes of Ludlow St Laurence and Ludlow St John - 15/5/17*

Reading: 2 Corinthians 5: 11-21

Welcome to all.

Thank you to all those who have carried an extra load during the vacancy. I know that for many it has been a very pressured time. Thank you especially to the churchwardens and retired clergy. It's always risky to single out names but I must mention Jeffrey Wilcox & Shaun Ward.

Now we look ahead with eager anticipation to Kelvin's ministry here, and extend to Kelvin and his family a very warm welcome.

Now some of you may know the book "The Screwtape Letters", written some 75 years ago by C.S. Lewis. It's a series of letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, to a junior one, Wormwood, giving advice to the junior one as to how best to knock Christians off course.

I find myself wondering what Screwtape would write to Wormwood if he was to turn his attention now to St Laurence and St John's Ludlow.

“My Dear Wormwood, word has reached me that a new appointment has been made at Ludlow. Apparently, he is rather good, which is worrying.

Kelvin Price comes with many commendations. Those who know him have spoken of his strong faith, energy and care – some have said his ministry has been an inspiration: this is worrying.

It strikes me that you are going to have to work quite hard to blow things off course. You are going to have to keep your wits about you if we are going to prevent God from getting the upper hand in the ministry of the churches.

But it will be worth a try and I have got some ideas for you.

Kelvin has a passion for mission and learning from the bible. This is serious: please start by reminding everybody that they are members of the Church of England.

The letter from St Paul to the Corinthian church was all about how God reconciled the world to himself through Jesus and now gives Christians today the ministry of reconciliation. The reading spoke of things being new because of Christ, “a new creation” no less, Christians as Christ’s ambassadors. This is serious stuff but I am sure we can find ways to distract people from it.

I see that Kelvin will be sharing his duties between two parishes. It will be very important for you to do all you can to play one off against the other. Forget the fact that everyone has to juggle competing demands on their time, try like mad to make people think he should always be elsewhere. There is nothing like a nice little mixture of guilt and inadequacy to disable ministry.

There is a real danger that what Kelvin believes in and has been doing matches what the PCC has asked for. This is another worrying fact. The PCC has said that there is need to provide leadership, and they have also emphasised the key priority of numerical and spiritual growth.

The PCC has said they want a strong leader and a team player. That's not as impossible a mixture as it might seem, and it looks horribly as though Kelvin is both. But all is not lost. What you must do, my dear Wormwood, is this: whenever Kelvin makes a decision, sew a few seeds that there has not been enough consultation and that he seems to be a bit power-crazy; when there is consultation going on, let it be known that Kelvin seems to be a bit of a ditherer who can't make up his mind, that sort of thing.

Then the PCC has asked to have the traditional style of worship preferred by existing congregations enhanced, and a willingness to develop a wide variety of styles of worship. Of course, you know as well as I do that any church nowadays has to hold

these two together and with a touch of generosity of spirit that can happen. What you must do is make people feel it's one or the other. Then you will be home and dry.

The PCC has said they want someone to reach out. There is plenty of evidence that Kelvin will do that. He believes the Christian faith is to be shared with others. I hardly dare mention the word, but he seems to believe in evangelism. My dear Wormwood, if this caught on, there would be more people worshipping God in Ludlow than there are now. There is a worrying alignment here between what the PCC want and what they are being given. Never mind though, I reckon your best bet here is to lament that there seems to be too much emphasis on those outside the church. A quick rendition of, "It's not just about bums on seats" will help.

Then the Church Council has written a person specification, in which it refers to the need for perseverance in the face of apathy, indifference or even a measure of hostility." You shouldn't find it too difficult to stir up a bit of apathy.

Make sure that you encourage the people to affirm their new vicar as a human being. I gather he is married with six children - I rather get the idea it's not just his imagination which is fertile.

Make sure everyone knows how lucky they are to have a family man; that way, when they haven't seen him at something they can quietly let it be

known that they are beginning to think he is spending too much time with his family.

If I am honest, my dear Wormwood, I have a nasty feeling we are not going to make it in Ludlow. The churches there have a lot about them. The people are very committed to Christian faith, they are looking forward with anticipation to the next chapter of their life as a church. You may have to work quite hard to keep them distracted if not overwhelmed by the needs of the building and other important practical everyday questions which can so easily become all important. Once those matters are kept in proper perspective, we are lost.

And the letter is signed, you affectionate Uncle, Screwtape”.

Kelvin, Wormwood is around, he seems to be everywhere, but you come here with prayers, goodwill and the support of many people. You have many gifts for ministry; you come to churches with a rich inheritance and commitment to the future.

God has committed to you the message of reconciliation. “God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation.” That is a deeply spiritual agenda. God bless you in your new ministry.

And now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in

the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.