

20th September 2020

Parsons

**"Parsons are very like men,
and neither the better nor the worse for wearing a black gown."**
Lord Chesterfield, Letters to his Son (1774)

I qualified as a football referee in my late twenties. The regular training classes, meetings of the Referees' Association and the games themselves provided respite from the demands of parish ministry, as well giving me much-needed exercise. I only refereed under-14s, youth-club and Boys Brigade games, but I loved it. But I decided not to referee in my own parish or anywhere locally. I was well-known; there would be conflicts of interests; and how could I live with the flack if I got things wrong? However ...

One Sunday afternoon I was phoned by one of my elders who ran the local under-11 Youth Club team telling me that the referee for their 2.30 game had called off and they needed a replacement. I protested. But the next thing I knew I was in my black referee's kit (back then it was always black) at the Community Centre as that day's match official.

I went into the away-team's dressing room to introduce myself, "Have a good game, lads. Play the whistle. No back-chat." The usual lecture. They didn't know me from Adam and appeared happy enough. But when I went into the home-team's dressing room, everyone stopped, and a silence descended. I began, "I know, lads, that I'm your school chaplain, but today I'm your referee. So ..." and went on with the usual spiel. I'd never had such rapt attention from a bunch of eleven-year-olds. As I turned to leave, one of the boys tugged my shorts and said shakily, "Haw, Mr Gordon. Does that mean you've stopped bein' a priest now?"

It wasn't appropriate to offer an ecclesiological treatise on the nature of ministry or the distinction between a Presbyterian clergyman and a Roman Catholic priest. But at that moment I hoped Lord Chesterfield was right, that I was neither better nor worse for wearing the black of a parson *or* a referee, and that I managed to exercise both roles with equal integrity, skill and good humour. And least, on a wet Sunday afternoon on a muddy football pitch, nobody suggested anything different.

A prayer for today

Loving God, help me to be fair, to get it right, and have no black marks. Amen.

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