

Collated but not stapled

by Martin Vander Weyer

A collation, in my dictionary, is 'a bringing together for comparison', or 'a light meal permitted on fast days'. For lawyers, it means something to do with wills and estates. In church life, I now know, it is a ceremonial induction – and a most absorbing way to spend a Monday morning. Our own David Wilbourne was thus collated as an honorary canon of York Minster on 30 June, and on our first away fixture as the new churchwarden team, Anne Stewart and I were privileged to attend the whole arcane procedure.

We assembled in the Consistory Court for coffee, the candidates' supporters mingling amid a throng of clergymen trying to robe themselves for the events to come: so it became rather like a coffee morning in an unusually genteel rugby changing room. From there we passed to the Zouche Chapel for a swearing of vows and blessing by Archbishop Sentamu – who broke the tension with a joke about another meaning of collation, to do with the functions of photocopiers: 'You are about to be collated. I expect you're wondering whether you're also going to be stapled.'

Next, to the octagonal Chapter House for a meeting of the College of Canons – whose existing members occupied stone niches around the octagon, while the four new entrants formed up in front of the central table. At this point the Dean, Keith Jones – who I hope will take it as a compliment if I describe him as Trollopean – attempted a slightly less successful joke in similar vein to Dr Sentamu's, about how much easier it would be to do all this inducting by email. But his main task was to give the new canons each a bible and what I would identify as a granary bap – representing the bread of life – then lead them towards their allotted niches and, with a hand on each shoulder, push them firmly into their seats.

That having been achieved without injury, we guests were asked to leave the College to its deliberations. We dispersed to seek collations of our own in nearby cafes and later reassembled, joined by quite a crowd from Helmsley, for the last act: Holy Communion in the Minster quire at which, yet again, the Dean led the new canons by the hand to their appointed stalls.

A canon, by the way, can be a body of rules, a list of saints or a piece of music, as well as a member of a cathedral chapter. But what I took away from these fascinating ceremonies was that to be a canon of York Minster – to find your own niche in that ancient, wonderful, spiritual place – has a very special meaning indeed. We can all be very proud that David has been chosen.