



Vicar's Hook

Have you ever met an angel ? How would you know? When they break into our realm they are just like us as far as we can see. That's why the official guide at St Helen's visitor centre didn't recognise reverend Jim when he called by. He had been at St Helen's long enough to know that generally vicars do not equate with angels. However, Jim really was one. An angel that is. He left the vicar bit behind with his worn out body.

It was Jim's turn you see. But then perhaps you don't know that every two hundred and thirty-seven years the 'departed' who haven't really departed but just moved over a bit, are allowed a day as an angel, just to go back and have a look at the old places. A day is enough for most of them. They either want to come back in the first five minutes or want to stay for ever and change everything back to the way it used to be. At the end of his day, Jim did not want to stay, but he certainly wanted to change things.

Early morning, when he first arrived it was almost like heaven to walk through the fields of his old parish. Then he came across the housing estates. The church which had once been approached across the fields was now enclosed by buildings packed tightly around wide roads. The cottages had gone. He could not find the vicarage. Florence would be sad. It took him a while to see that an enormous barn of a place now stood next to the church where the vicarage had been.

Jim was surprised to find the church door locked. However that's no problem to an angel. But it is to an official guide. 'How did you get in here ?' he asked when he arrived to see Jim rising from his knees at the altar rail. 'Through the door,' Jim replied with a grin. The guide scratched his head where the hair used to be while trying to look at Jim and the door at the same time. 'The visitor centre's open if you'd like to go in,' was all he could say. 'I just have to get the viewing area ready in here.' He bustled away towards the vestry door, but did not go in. 'Still too much clutter in there to use it as a vestry I expect,' he said.

The official guide - it said that on his large lapel badge - ignored the comment having made up his mind that that this fellow was a bit odd. He was still puzzling as to how the man got in with the door being locked. Maybe he himself had made a mistake. Maybe he had not locked the door last night and then just thought he had turned the key this morning. He arranged two rows of chairs facing the vestry door. He then placed another chair to the side of the door and stood on it. Next he pulled a large yellow duster from his pocket and proceeded to polish an already gleaming brass coat-hook on the panel to one side of the door.

'Next talk isn't till ten o'clock,' he informed the curious ex-vicar, 'But you can see all about it in the visitor centre next door.' Jim, in whimsical mood, made his way to what would have been his old home. He managed to pay for an entrance ticket. He had been instructed in things like that on the 'back to the world' orientation course before he left. They had told him about the pictures too, but Jim was still fascinated by the video. Having looked at displays telling him about the village's history, with pictures of real people working in the fields, the bakery, the smithy, he sat in front of the moving pictures.

As the story unfolded, Jim's jaw dropped lower and lower. He heard how the brass hook outside the vestry door was now called 'the holy hook'. People from all over made pilgrimages just to see it. Some believed it actually turned to white gold when at certain times the moon shone through the one plain glass panel in the east window. And if that happened during the last two weeks of Advent, crowds gathered, expecting miracles to happen. It was all because one night in Advent two hundred and thirty years ago a lame tramp who had been taking refuge in the church, had seen the moon light up the hook and claimed he had been healed as he watched it.

Jim spluttered. Words would not come. He could not stop himself laughing aloud. The woman to whom he had paid his admission fee gave him a look that sent him straight back to memories of sitting at a bench in the village school. He glanced incredulously at the photographs of the hook taken from every angle, and the exhibition of children's drawings of hooks and angels, before striding out of the centre. Jim barely noticed the array of erudite books about the St Helen's hook which took up twelve shelves of a bookcase.

Back at the church, he pushed wide the door and walked across to the platform below the hook. He had determined to tell the official guide the truth, but stopped short when he saw the small group of people, some standing, some kneeling, gazing adoringly at the hook. For their sakes he stifled the laughter which welled up again and took himself to the lady chapel.

It did not seem right to be laughing there either, and as he relived the story, the humour waned. He remembered that night in Advent. There had been cross words about the vestry. Everybody's clutter went in there and when it became so jammed full with Christmas greenery that he could not get in to robe for service, Jim felt enough was enough. He would show them. He went back to the church late that Sunday night, having prized an old brass hook from the back of the privy door, and blessed by a shaft of moonlight right to the place, had screwed that hook, where it still hung today. Thomas, his church-warden thought it was a huge joke and promised he would polish it and make it the brightest brass hook in the parish. Jim also thought about old Harry. There were times when he was lame and times when he was not, and there were times when Jim took pity on him and let him sleep off the cider in the back pew.

Now Jim slipped to his knees at the chapel rail. The laughter had left him. His tears rolled across the polished oak. He thought of all those people who came, even paid, to see a brass hook. He thought of all those who had not come when he had offered them the gift of Christ in word, and in bread and wine. One day back in the parish was far too long and far too short.