



9. Why Do Servers And Choir Wear Special Clothes?

Servers, in the Church of England, perform many of the functions proper in the pre-Reformation Church to Subdeacons and Acolytes. These were originally two of the minor orders, i.e. grades of clergy junior to deacons. As such, it was proper for them to wear the alb, a long white tunic girded at the waist, but not any of the other vestments proper to deacons or priests, such as the stole or chasuble.

The minor orders were abolished in the Church of England at the Reformation. However with the reintroduction of more solemn and elaborate ceremonial at the Eucharist in the nineteenth century it was desirable that there should be assistance for the priest in preparing the altar and sanctuary, bringing the bread and wine to the celebrant, etc. This is the function of the servers. Their office is concerned with the sanctuary, and this is now denoted by their wearing cassock and surplice, or, nowadays at St Mary's, albs.

The Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship traces choristers back to the Temple in Jerusalem. Certainly, choirs in Christian worship were in existence as early as 360, when the Council of Laodicea forbade anyone else to sing in church! The rule had been relaxed by 600, when the congregations were given simple melodies and refrains to sing and the choirs performed the more elaborate settings.

In England, after the Reformation, the cathedral choirs survived, as before, while in parochial churches there were choirs of men and women or charity schoolchildren, usually in a gallery at the west end. At this time, 'support' was often provided by a country band, or 'quire', also in the gallery - music groups are nothing new! With the rediscovery of Catholic ceremonial, choirs were moved into stalls at the east end of the church, and the 'quires' were replaced by organs. To emphasise their distinctive status, the choristers were put into cassocks and surplices ('choir dress'). At St Mary's, these were found to be difficult to maintain in an acceptable condition and about the time we changed to a more contemporary style of vestment for staff the present blue robes were introduced.