

MY IMAGE AND I

How public figures see themselves

Hip priest of the New Age

HIP, CONTROVERSIAL and publicity-keen priest who keeps beehives on his roof. Radical, blunt and flamboyant rector with the New Age Disneyland and counselling caravan in his church yard. Passionate man of rousing sermons and woolly sweaters.

Such is the image of the Rev Donald Reeves, the "Red Vicar" and rector of St James's Church, Piccadilly. He closes the curtains fully against the sun in his rectory study — a room lined with books, most of which he's read — and asks me to sit in the Bishop's chair.

He was going to dress specially for this occasion — and then he forgot. So he's wearing a faded lumberjack-style shirt with missing button, grey trousers and 12-year-old shoes (polished by his former second lieutenant). He also wears a gold chain.

"I have a problem with clothes because I live in three different places. I often find myself in the wrong place with the wrong clothes." He looks massively perplexed and speaks quickly, often emphasising the last word in the sentence. "I like to dress casually."

When the photographer arrives, he changes into priest's grey shirt and dog collar, "otherwise people will think I'm some worn-out headmaster or failed film star." He reckons people "patronise, ignore or disdain" him in such garb. "And I get sick of tourists asking me the way to Stratford-upon-Avon when I'm standing in Piccadilly." (He says: "Just turn left at the top.") They think I'm some sort of unofficial guide."

He has a voice that needs no microphone whether in church or cathedral. "I'm an actor, really." He later admits that preaching sometimes becomes an ego trip; and he *loves* doing television.

What else would he like people to think he is? "Ooh, the editor of the Observer." He actually fancies he looks a bit like an exhausted newspaper editor. He has the face of a haunted ghost, with loads of M

shapes engraved on his forehead and dark eyes with circles underneath to match. He appears tired and grey.

"People always say my face is quite interesting. I like my face. My body's not too bad — I had a good look at it this morning, knowing you were coming to see me."

He considers his eyes the windows to his soul. "Mine look troubled and quite deep." And why does he look so anxious? "Well, I've been through it a bit in my life. Also because of the hidden work I do with people, supporting and encouraging."

"Of course, the Press always love this thing about my unhappy childhood — so I've changed the story now: I had the most marvellous, blissful childhood." He had psychotherapy for five years, to help him come to terms with his "desultory" relationship with his family and to develop his vocation as a priest. He's 57 and proud of it. "I feel I'm approaching the prime of my life. That'll be when I'm about 80 if God allows me to live that long." Does he fear dying? "I think I'm frightened of a long illness, but I'm not frightened of the actual dying. Not at the moment, anyway."

He's a strong character with a delightful sense of humour and seriousness. He comes over initially as rather impatient, with a defensive

Rev Donald Reeves: "The Press always love this thing about my unhappy childhood — so I've changed the story now: I had the most marvellous, blissful childhood"

deep level. But I am a passionate, serious man — probably too serious, but not the whole time. I bother about the truth sometimes."

He's also at pains to change the perception of vicars as those ineffective, nice-to-everybody people.

"I'm not a do gooder or a sensitive, caring wimp — but I am thoughtful about people who are in a mess." Indeed, he's doing a dedicated job, lots of good works, and has boosted his ailing congregation and placed his church on the map.

Is he the Red Vicar? "That's

So how would he describe himself? "I like my clarity about issues, my passion for people, my generosity and my imagination. I'm not in the least jealous of other people's success — that's a God-given thing."

"My weakness is that my judge of character is sometimes questionable. I always see the best in people, even the rascals. And I'm also very impatient about meetings — there's an ecclesiastical disease where people seem to need to have meetings about everything from collecting harmoniums to dead cats."

Is he impatient? "What?" He says, yet again. (Is he deaf? Certainly there's an abruptness there.) "No, I'm not deaf. It's just that I'm having to think on my feet. But I do suffer from tinnitus. I have a sort of impatience. I get very fed up with busybodies who criticise my work here. And I get really angry with rich, mean people."

Is he a hypocrite? "Oh, all the time. I think religious people are. I always say to people 'do as I say, not as I do.' For example, he disappears of private property. "But I have a house."

Curiously, he comes over as rather hard. "I know I can be intimidating. People are frightened of me. I don't like that. But it's my armour."

"Inside, I think I have a longing to be comforted, to be held physically and emotionally." His face changes extraordinarily as he says this, becoming vulnerable and boyish. "There is a little boy inside me and I want to safeguard that inner child and prevent him from being squashed."

He never married. How does he regard himself sexually? "I don't!" — he stutters — "think about this subject much. Because there's not much to say about it. I'd call myself celibate, but I'm not a grim, ascetic, dismal person. I don't want to talk about my sexuality..."

"Well, yes, there have been times when I've been lonely, but they grow less as I get older. I know a lot about friendship. But I think we go on too much about sexuality and personal relations. It's one of the idolatries of our society."

How long has he been celibate? His voice goes low. "Twenty-something years — I don't know. No, it's not for religious reasons. It's really to do with my personality. Maybe it's a sort of fear. I've often been quite frightened of a close relationship like that. I had them when I was much younger, but I'm fearful of them."

Caroline Phillips

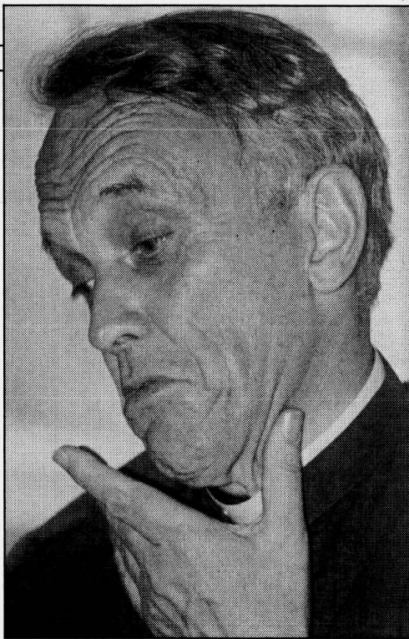


Photo: Graham Wainwright

There is a little boy inside me and I want to prevent him from being squashed

curtiness that belies his obviously caring nature. (It's almost as if he overcompensates to protect himself from being ridiculed or patronised.)

He has a brusque, angry manner that hides his nervousness. He listens well, being very open to suggestions. And as the interview progresses, he softens — risking his vulnerable, gentle side.

He's keen to dispel his trendy image. "It suggests one's flippant at a

absurd. I'm more to the Left than the Right — but there's not much difference between the two now." The image, he says, came about because Ken Livingstone and Tony Benn spoke at St James's. "But so did Norman Tebbit."

And is he controversial? "I don't seek it, but it is inevitable if you do sort of things I do. Occasionally, I go over the top. And is he the loony vicar? "Well, they thought Jesus was pretty loony."