

“Leaving the Upper Room”

A Sermon preached on Pentecost Sunday 2008 at the Bakewell Agricultural Centre to launch the Mission and Ministry Area of the South Peak

Pentecost is the birthday of the Church and on Pentecost 2008 we gather to celebrate the coming to birth of the Mission and Ministry Area of the South Peak (formerly – and before it took on a proper identity of its own “MMA 7”).

How appropriate! How suitable is that! On the day the Church universal celebrates its coming into being through the gift to the Apostles of the Holy Spirit of God, the Church local celebrates the coming into existence of a new way of being Church in our time and communities. I congratulate you – first and foremost – on your timing. And as I do so, I want to explore these two birth events and how one can inform and inspire the other.

You see there was something very distinctive about the first Christian Pentecost, in Jerusalem, and we need to check whether the same distinctive marks are present at Pentecost 2008 in Bakewell. And at the risk (for a moment) of sounding depressing, I have to say that an obvious discrepancy occurs to me at the very outset.

When Peter and the Apostles founded the Church (or found the Church to have come into existence by the gift of the Spirit, which is a more accurate description of what happened) they didn't – I regret to say – seem to follow very good practice. They didn't follow the approved procedures or protocols. There was no committee, no trustees or officers – no ground rules or minute book or constitution. No PCC or MMA Council ... no Treasurer or Faculty or Fabric Committee (or anything to have a Fabric Committee about) ... no coffee rota or tea cups or tea urn to negotiate (or quarrel) over ... Indeed, it's very hard to know how they were sure that they were a Church at all!

The establishment of an MMA, by contrast, is a very orderly affair whereby careful and extensive negotiation leads to well charted and well documented arrangements. Everybody knows where they stand and everything is very well ordered indeed.

And this, of course, can be the problem: it's very, very easy to see the establishment of the MMA (and the Renewing Ministry idea which is its context) purely in terms of its *orderliness*. MMA: a new way of ordering Church – new structures, new responsibilities, new lines of accountability, new processes and procedures – because that's what we've got used to in the setting up and running of Church: organisation.

But what becomes clear when we look at the first Pentecost was that it was a very *disorganised* affair. Indeed, the Pentecost event seemed to militate against – to deconstruct – what little order there was in the embryonic Christian community.

There they were, gathered in the Upper Room, a community of believers who knew each other, who spoke each other's language, who had some idea of how shared life in the community worked ... and along came the Holy Spirit and smashed all that up!

They were driven out of the Upper Room and what it represented by way of stability, familiarity, security and order and pitched into the street where there were all those Elamites and Medes and Parthians and Mesopotamians and whatnot with their uncouth ways and *no idea at all of how to be a Church!* And, even more remarkably, they found themselves – these first, Pentecost-filled Christians – *not* instructing the Elamites and Parthians and Phrygians and Co. in how to be Church in the old way, drawing them in (as it were) to the Upper Room because that is what Church and Faith are like and all about. (They may have wanted to do that, mind you, but that’s not what they found themselves doing in the power of the Spirit.)

No: those first Christians, filled with the Spirit of Pentecost and driven out from the familiarity and safety of the Upper Room on the birthday of the Church, found themselves equipped miraculously to meet the strangers and outsiders, the oddities and the needy, *out there* in *their* place and to speak to them in their own languages.

It is delightful to me that we are inaugurating the MMA of the South Peak not in a Church or Chapel, not (as it were) in an Upper Room but out here in the place (we may say) of the Phrygians and Pamphylians – the street, the non-Churchy place of business and exchange and gossip and community, where the language and the norms are very different from those we are familiar with. And as we do so we are reminding ourselves that the purpose of Church is not tidy organisation or efficient functioning or (even) economy or getting the best out of our money or clergy or whatever. No: the organisation of Church (which is not unimportant) comes much further down the line. The purpose of Church is to worship God and to find God in God’s people, serving God in their world.

And that means speaking their languages and adapting to their cultures and occupying their places. “Mission” and “Ministry”, which are very churchy terms, are all about this kind of engagement and response to and with God in God’s world and God’s people and Pentecost is an excellent time to reconnect with that fact.

So my prayer for this MMA – the Mission and Ministry Area of the South Peak – as for MMAs across the diocese, and the idea of Renewing Ministry itself – will be that it will be saved from becoming no more than a new Upper Room, a different structure to order and a new culture to service and maintain. St Paul, from whose first letter to the Corinthians our second reading was taken [1 Cor. 12 4-11], was no stranger to the challenge of organising Church but his great essay on the gifts of the Spirit says almost nothing about organising them but almost everything about releasing them.

That’s what happened at Pentecost, of course: the gifts of communication – of listening and telling, of engaging, understanding and addressing folk where they were – were released and driven out of the Upper Room. Church began, in fact, with a mighty act of deconstruction so that gifts could be set free: that’s what happened at the first Pentecost in Jerusalem. Will it be the same for Pentecost 2008 in Bakewell?