

Maggie Butcher

from a sermon preached 9 July 2007 St James's, Piccadilly

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Maggie Butcher's brief is to preach the sermon at the eucharist on a typical Sunday morning at St James's, taking as her text the church's mission statement. As it happens she's not impressed with mission statements as a concept, associated as they are with image-making and branding in the commercial world.

"I'm allergic to them," she admits.

Maggie, now 60, was academic registrar at Gresham College until taking early retirement seven years ago, suffering from ME. Since then, she says, she's been "slowly learning to adapt to being less pressured, less driven, and more contemplative both in my life and in my faith and practice."

A lifelong, active Anglican, she's worked in Nigeria (twice) and Canada: it was while working as a teaching fellow at the University of Saskatchewan that she "reconnected" with liberal Anglicanism, and she's worshipped at St James's Piccadilly since 1992.

It's a church which values the voice of the laity and champions the cause of women, and Maggie is at home here. She says she's nervous as she talks, but it doesn't show. Articulate and fun and looking stunningly un-churchy in a bright pink cardigan with a big frill, she eschews the elaborate Jacobean pulpit for a closer encounter with the congregation from the chancel. This is how they do it at St James's: no time for preaching from on high with a lofty demeanour.

She is addressing that part of the mission statement which seeks to define the place of St James's Church in the community: *"to create a space where people of any faith or none can question and discover the sacred in life through openness, struggle, laughter and prayer."*

This is a brief extract from her sermon, which explains something of what it means to her to belong to the St James's community:

"When I think of St James's, now or looking towards the future, I see a series of dancing, interlocking parabolas, a kind of kaleidoscope of shifting shapes, of movement and colour, where we interact in shared hope, help create a sense of shared energy, vision and purpose. Where the exigencies, constraints and demands of the physical neither determine the activity nor preclude new ways of being, of understanding, for us as individuals and as community.

"Each week a different set of people, 'regulars', visitors, people who have come back after absence, those thinking perhaps about making this their regular place of worship, come together; people brought up in the Christian faith or not, lifelong Anglicans, erstwhile evangelicals, people of other faiths or none, feel drawn by a sense that here is something, a place, a space, but also a dynamic, evolving community where they might 'question and discover the sacred in life'.

"For some the journey might have been haphazard, chancy, for some deliberate. Some of us have felt rejected by other churches, some have never wanted or known a church before landing up here. Some are here because they have indeed suffered persecution or duress in their home countries and joined us only after release from detention in this country. Our experiences have all been different but all of us have been drawn here, by a sense of home-coming, a sense that something special happens here: that we are on a journey, open to and recognising that the example and teachings of Jesus might just somehow be relevant to the way we conduct our

lives; even that the liturgies and practice of the Church instituted in his name might provide a shape, a pattern which might still resonate and have meaning.

“But also that new ways of seeing, doing, being, are available that could be the nudgings of the Holy Spirit, suggesting, guiding, tugging us even, in new and surprising directions, opening our minds and hearts to greater awareness. As the Mission Statement suggests, ‘through openness, struggle, laughter and prayer’ we discover the sacred.”