

***Mixed-up Blessing: a new encounter with being church,***

Barbara Glasson (Inspire, 2006)

*Mixed-up Blessing* begins with a dialogue about making bread. Someone is up to their elbows in the dough. This immediately feels like a 'different' book. And it is.

This story of the bread church in Liverpool is an account of a church which is different. 'Somewhere Else' (the name arose because the church meets above a shop called News from Nowhere) 'is the name of a church that is not afraid to engage with people who struggle with the idea of church yet still have an inner sense that God is up to something.'

I was intrigued by the context in which the story arose. The old Methodist Central Hall in Liverpool city centre had been closed, and Barbara Glasson was given the following brief: 'Go and find if there's a place for the Methodist church in the city centre; and for God's sake do something different.' And taking with her the word 'bread' which had come to her, she went.

As Barbara wandered the streets, meeting and talking to people, she discovered rhythms, a sense of the place. And she started making bread with some friends. The book is a story of the journey, mostly from Barbara's own perspective, but occasionally using the voices of others. She describes how people became involved in bread making, some through providing ingredients, others through coming to find out what was going on, and gradually the community grew.

The author is honest about the challenges: initially, of not knowing where to start, and later of the sheer variety of people involved, many of them quite needy. How does one respond to those with mental health issues, and those who have been abused? But through it all we see God at work: in the welcome, in the faith-sharing group, in Sunday worship, weddings and baptisms, in the bubbling up of vocations to ordained ministry.

At times, the author addresses the reader. She wants to encourage others who might want to try similar new ways of 'being church'. But she is anxious that people do not see the bread church as a 'church plant'. She feels she's not been planting a church; she has been a scarecrow: 'scarecrow ministry is less about planting something and more about looking lovingly at an empty patch, hoping for signs of life, staying with the belief in the invisible things God has sown.'

For me the book prompted a number of questions, which will be familiar to those involved in Fresh Expressions. What makes a group of people a 'church'? What limits, if any are there, what boundaries? When might inclusivity, seeing people as God sees them, become failure to bring the gospel to bear on their lives?

Unconventional? Definitely. A fascinating story, told with a rare honesty, and well worth reading, but one which raises, as intended, more questions than answers.