

# Ecclesia - thon

The Diary of Perry and Pat Ettick 2005

## Who are Perry and Pat?

Perry and Pat are setting out to spend six months exploring the Christian Church, largely in the North East of England. They come from a generally nonconformist and evangelical background; for the last fifteen years they have been quite heavily involved in the life of a small and informal modern 'new church' or fellowship in Tynedale but now they are taking an open-ended 'sabbatical', six months off to visit other congregations, and perhaps see if there is somewhere else they ought to be. This is a diary of what they find, and what they think about it. They have tried to be honest - but, dear reader, remember that these are only the subjective opinions of two fallible people. They claim no apostolic authority!

### (1) St James Riding Mill 9 1 05

The beginning; Perry and Pat go to their local village church. They first tried it when they came to the village twenty years ago, but the vicar then put them off a bit by being a bit over-liberal and preaching on all the things he felt one did not need to believe. But the world has changed since then. Although led by the present vicar, in a relaxed and friendly manner, this was basically quite a formal Anglican service, with absolutely no space or opportunity for unscheduled participation, a robed choir processing past, and an immaculate and quite elaborate building. The service demanded juggling between quite a few books, and the music was in the 'hymns ancient and older' category - nothing within the last half century. But, and there were a few buts, there was the beautiful language of some of the liturgy, prayers and the communion were led in a clear and reverent manner, and there was some very relevant material in the sermon from the visiting Archdeacon. Afterwards there was coffee in the school room. As regards welcome, St James rates close to excellent ; although Perry and Pat knew quite a few people, others came to greet them, and they went away encouraged by the number of Christians who live round about them and whom they can still get to know.

### (2) Hexham Abbey 16 1 05

P & P thought they were going for an ordinary Abbey service at 10.00 but it turned out to be a combined one (for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity), at 10.30; Perry had visited the previous day specifically to check the noticeboard but this had not been announced. Nevermind! So it was the Community Church leader in the pulpit, with contributions from a young peoples' dance group from the Catholics, an introduction to the new Methodist minister (who basically told a joke - but it was a funny one), a burst of plainsong from the Abbey choir and a lovely song 'Outrageous Grace' from a Community Church couple. The church was pretty well packed - overall the service was a bit ragged, but there were lots of really encouraging things, like the leader's first words 'How many churches are there in Hexham' and the answering shout 'One' - different congregations but one church. Some things took a bit of time, like when the whole congregation came out with bits of coloured felt they had been given, to stick them on a banner that said 'Glory to God', so the sermon/sermonette at the end was a bit rushed, but good anyway. 'Ecumenical' used to be word to guarantee boredom, the lowest common denominator that offended no-one, but this was different. Perry was thoroughly heartened by the whole thing, Pat (and a friend who was with us) felt the leading was not quite appropriate to the occasion. And they still need to go back for a proper Abbey service.

### (3) Guisborough Fellowship 23 1 05

Geographically Guisborough is outside Perry and Pat's planned circuit, but they were spending the day with an old friend, and decided to attend to church with her first. Guisborough Fellowship is a 'new' church, ie twenty or thirty years old, and is quite large (maybe seventy or eighty this morning), meeting in a college hall. This was obviously not a very standard service. It started with string-of-songs worship, led by Texan lady youth-worker, all very me-focused; we sang a real oldie 'It is well with my soul' followed by a 'can you really say that?' challenge, a bit cringeworthy. Then we had open prayer, and one brother was just a bit too long-winded; there was that disconcerting moment when one is trying to feel with it and spiritual but the little voice in one's head suddenly pipes out loud and clear 'for goodness sake shut up now....'. Freedom like this is quite the other side of the coin to Anglican formality; Perry in particular did not really find this very helpful. Thereafter quite a chunk of the almost-two-hour service was taken up with an outlining of what the fellowship was doing over the next few months, with a little sermon tacked on and then a brief communion at the end. Powerpoint was used, which as often proved to be a total shambles; in a more formal service this would have been a disaster but did not seem to matter so much here, as everything was pretty relaxed. This is clearly a lively active congregation, engaged in doing things with other local churches and involvement with the local community, which all feels very positive, although there is also a hint that a strand of traditional charismatic housechurchianity, with strong male leadership, lies just behind the scenes. There was coffee and biscuits afterwards, and people were very welcoming, lots coming to greet their visitors; full marks there!

#### **(4) Kinmel Bay Evangelical Church 30 1 05**

Perry and Pat are again visiting friends, this time in North Wales, and this is their friends' home church; it is part of the FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches). It meets in a brand new building, a big cube with a pyramidal roof; inside the seating is arranged in curved rows, facing a dais set diagonally in one corner, under the words 'JESUS IS LORD'; otherwise all the walls are bare except for a series of little banners, a bit, but only a bit, like Stations of the Cross. The service was introduced by an elder, of an age concomitant with his position, with a disarming smile and manner, but largely taken by a younger and very Welsh minister-to-be, who is 'preaching with a view', ie as a potential pastor to this church. He too was excellent, both in speaking to the children and to the grown ups; his subject was John the Baptist and 'Behold the Lamb of God'; a good traditional preach, more exhortation than weighty theological instruction, but well delivered. We used Mission Praise - no overhead projector or powerpoint (thankfully) in sight - and the girl playing the piano for one played the right notes in the right places for the (fairly) modern songs. But the prayers- all led by the man on the dais, centre focus of all our eyes - were all for the church and its members, no mention of the Election in Iraq or anything else in the world outside - and there was no opportunity for anyone else in the congregation to participate in any way (except for some very enthusiastic hand clapping from one small sector of the congregation). Afterwards, Perry and Pat stood alone with their coffee, and had to take the lead in instigating conversations, but folks were friendly when they did so. It all felt a bit twenty-years-ago, the sort of place where if this change they will do so very slowly.

#### **(5) St Andrew's, Corbridge**

Perry and Pat return to home territory, and their original scheme of being Anglican for a while - and visit another church where they already have quite a few friends. The vicar, clad in white and looking a bit like a Carmelite friar, was standing outside the door, greeting everyone as they entered. Inside, the building is both wonderfully and distractingly ancient, all dark rubble walls, light and shadow, and pillars one ends up sitting behind. The main body of the church was almost full. This was both a communion and a baptismal service (for a baby), so there was the odd hurdle to be got over for those of us brought up in the Baptist tradition that this is something that should really be done with adults and larger volumes of water. The hymns were all oldies, but good and singable ones, led by the organ (great intro and outro to 'Guide me O Thou Great Redeemer'). The whole service did have a connected-up feel, partly a result of using the lectionary - the readings were Moses on Sinai and the Transfiguration - with a constant return to the theme of light. The sermon, delivered by the vicar standing in the nave, totally without notes, was brilliant, bringing together the Scriptures with nuclear physics, Einstein's theory of relativity, and the baby being welcomed into the church family - lots to take away and think about. The backdrop was of course

polite and formal Anglicanism - lots of people (including choir) in robes, just a discreet handshake with those in handshaking distance for the Peace, but the overall feel was friendly. There did not seem to be coffee or any further socialising happening immediately afterwards, but definitely a good service to have been to.

#### **(6) St James, Riding Mill again 13 2 05**

Perry and Pat have been here before; this visit was due to their daughter and boyfriend 'casing the joint' as a possible venue for a future matrimonial ceremony. The previous impression - formal but friendly - was maintained. The vicar commenced his sermon with describing a section of Paul's letter to Timothy as 'horribly misogynistic' which caused a good debate over the dining table afterwards; can Scripture be horribly misogynistic? However the rest of his talk was pretty sound (ie Perry and Pat agreed with it) and very listenable-to. At the end of the service we sang 'You shall go out with joy' (to the organ) and there was actually a brief outburst of happy clappiness from the choir. Reeling from this outburst of rampant charisma, we fled to coffee; much friendly chat.

#### **(7) St Mary Magdalene, Prudhoe 20 2 05**

A morning of East Coast snow; from a green Riding Mill five miles to a white Prudhoe. Simple 1880 Anglican church, wide nave with transepts and narrower chancel, fair congregation but not packed. We were rather taken back by the initial contact - Pat was asked if she would deliver the elements to the altar, and gracefully demurred. We could have been Melanesian Frog Worshippers! The worship team (singers plus electric piano) were singing some modern songs beforehand, but during the service we had mostly traditional hymns (admittedly from 'Mission Praise' rather than 'Hymns Ancient and Ancient'; the last one 'My Song is Love Unknown' one of the greats, contrasting to the Victorian pietism of 'Blessed Assurance'. The service was very much low church, with a constant background ululation of kiddies. The sermon was reminiscent of the Apostle Paul in that it was a great torrent of theology sweeping along seemingly without pause or punctuation, about being born again, and how this was something God did and we had no claim to involvement in. Was there a behind-the-scenes subtext of a recent bruising encounter with a dogmatic evangelical here? It really needed English sub-titles and a comprehensible conclusion. Communion was a bit breathless too. At the end as the vicar headed out, his little girl raced down the aisle to meet him, which was lovely. Afterwards the welcome we received from congregation members could hardly have been bettered - led along to coffee in a church hall down the street, to meet and chat to some very friendly folk; this was great, a part-of-the-family experience.

#### **(8) Hexham Abbey 27 02 05**

This time Perry & Pat managed to find an 'ordinary' morning service here, although it was not really ordinary, as it was the beginning of Fair Trade Fortnight and Andy Redfern, late director of Traidcraft, was preaching. Lots of tradition and formality - big robed choir with lots of cherubic small males - and spectacular organ playing, all with a stunning architectural backdrop. Dagmar, who led, was really good, clear and unostentatious, and Andy's sermon was also very clear and listenable to. Good singable hymns (including that recent (ie 1980s) one about being like a panting deer). Pat reckoned the Anglicanism and the general sophistication of the music might be hard to handle long-term, Perry just enjoyed it, and thought if he actually lived here it might be a bit hard to stay away. Or was that just the flesh speaking? As John Betjemann prayed 'Whip down the dogs of lust, my Lord - here it's 'whip down the dogs of medieval rood screens and 13<sup>th</sup>-century colonettes and Anglo-Saxon crypts....'. Shut me up for penance in a concrete box. Coffee in the south transept afterwards, maybe fairly traded but rather sadly in polystyrene cups; lots of smiles and greetings (although admittedly there are quite a few folk we know already), generally a good community feeling.

#### **(9) Jesmond Parish Church 13 03 05**

A trip to the big Newcastle commuter church for evangelical Anglicans, a fine Victorian gothic edifice, still with all its original galleries - and all mod cons as well, including a screen on every

pillar so those sitting behind it had a full view of what was going on!. The whole building seems in excellent condition, although the colour scheme of the entrance doors (scrolly blue hinges on yellow paint; a motif used on the welcome leaflet) was a bit violent for this hour of the morning. We went to the first of the two morning services (9.30 and 11.15); a couple of hundred people there, a mix of students and middle-aged, generally middle-class by appearances. A mixture of traditional hymns and modern songs; the thing that put Perry off most was the apparent pre-recorded backing tapes for the latter, however it turned out he just couldn't see the keyboard player and drummer... Pat likened the service to a well-oiled machine, rolling on with barely a pause. A good sermon on the Holy Spirit, and we were welcomed afterwards by someone who recognised us from years before; people seemed friendly and we guess would have greeted us anyway. Just occasionally it showed through that JPC (as it terms itself) is no ordinary church, but the flagship of the conservative wing of the Church of England, sailing into battle with all guns blasting at the liberal enemy, with the knowledge that soon it may run down its parent colours for ever and sail off with its well-heeled congregation to form a new independent state. Thirty years ago Perry and Pat were in St Thomas' Crookes in Sheffield, another flagship, this time flying the colours of charismatic renewal; they felt then that the big-successful-churchness all got a bit too much, and that they would prefer to be bobbing about in a much smaller boat where they could get to know the crew better and take a turn at trimming the sail or heaving on the oars... They think they still feel that way.

#### **(10) Leominster Baptist Church 27 3 05**

Today Perry and Pat, staying with Pat's sister in the Herefordshire market town of Leominster, went to church twice! First, the morning; the church is quite a handsome brick building dated '1771', with rather nasty Victorian bench pews (of which more later) but other things to distract Perry like a Chinese Chippendale stair to the gallery and a beautiful old clock which has probably been timing sermons for two centuries. The building was pretty full - even folks in the gallery, and the service was great. The music was provided by a father-and-son duo on organ and keyboard, and Pat's sister on flute, and it was excellent; we sang a new Easter morning hymn which neither Perry nor Pat had heard before and it was a really fine one, tune and words. The teenagers did a dance, the pastor acted out Jesus' meeting the disciples with the younger kids, and it all worked, a real celebration.... OK, there was no coffee afterwards, but it was one of the best Easter Sunday mornings either Perry or Pat had been too for quite a while.

But (and why is there always a but?) they went to the evening service as well, and experienced how something seemingly trivial can become a distraction, or present one with a different pair of spectacles to view the proceedings through. Here the morphology of the church, and in particular those Victorian bench pews, comes in. Perry and Pat entered, shook hands with the welcoming deacons in the entrance lobby, turned right, and came into the body of the church. There is a continuous division right down the middle of the church (bringing to mind that Gospel text, as transmuted through the musical 'Godspell' 'Sheep on the right, goats on the left') and each bench pew sits three. Perry and Pat entered a pew with a lady sitting at the end, enquired whether it was OK to sit there ...actually, she said, she was expecting her husband to join her. Nevermind, they went into the one behind, where another lady sat, who said nothing. Then a gentleman (who was apparently a deacon) appeared - could he sit beside his wife please? So P & P, if they wished to sit together, had no option but to get up, and, as this half of the church was now full, exit through the lobby and go into the other side of the church to find seating. Pretty trivial, but for Perry at least it destroyed the service, or at least his perception of it; utterly unlike the morning it was a rather tedious hymn sandwich with a worthy but uninspiring sermon. He just wished he had only gone in the morning and had that one alone living on in his memory bank. To give the church its due, there was coffee afterwards this time, and people were friendly, two ladies in fact apologising to Pat for the business of the pre-service displacement. It was a good object lesson in how to treat visitors - and also how touchy one can feel about what is after all a pretty trivial incident.

#### **11) Trinity Methodist Church, Hexham**

Trinity is one of a group of churches in the centre of Hexham that really seem to be getting together (as churches should have done all along) and acting as differing congregations but one body. The building is a very traditional Methodist town chapel, probably back end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, galleries

all round and a towering organ up dais, a modern cross in front of the organ being the only recent touch as far as the architecture went; the main body of the building was fairly full, and the age span quite varied. Despite the setting, the service managed to be generally Christian without being ostentatiously Methodist in any way. We had a brief 'orate pro anima' (in English) for the recently-departed Pope and a good glimpse of the church global in a young couple who in the space of a few years had already been involved in Christian work in dubious parts of New York, the Ukraine, and were now off to Japan. We also had a very professional bunch of muppet-type puppets singing 'O Happy Day' (which was a bit surreal, but fun) and the inevitable powerpoint that almost worked this time. The worship team hung a bit loose (as opposed to being tight) but when one saw the number of youngsters playing different instruments that was OK. The minister is broad Yorkshire and an excellent communicator; coffee afterwards in the labyrinth of attached buildings at the back; folks friendly.