



# E-Read



## The General Conference of the New Church **Articles and Letters**

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### The Upper Room

#### A reflection on part of the Easter story by Alan Misson.

If you invited guests into your home which room would you choose for them to settle down in? Of course the answer can depend on the size of your flat or house. But generally I think we would choose the lounge, sitting room, front room or whatever it is called – the place where comfortable chairs or sofas might be found. In Victorian times the room set aside for such a purpose was called the parlour and it was rarely entered on other occasions. However a lot of

people these days make the kitchen the place to welcome guests particularly if it has been made open plan and considerably extended. But you may feel that your house and its location are good enough that you can turn it into a B&B, providing well-equipped bedrooms, ideally with en-suite bathrooms, and a place for all guests to eat.

With these thoughts in mind turn to these words from Mark's gospel that describe the arrangements and the events surrounding Jesus' last celebration of the Passover.

Mark 14:12-25

*And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.*

*And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."*

*And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."*

Notice the detailed description of the place that Jesus wants to use to celebrate the Passover.

*Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us.*

Here we have a precise description of the place that needs to be prepared for Jesus – it is a large upper guest room. And that is what I want to focus on today in this reflection on part of the Easter story.



This picture shows a reconstructed interior of a simple house in ancient Israel. It has two floors, a lower or ground floor and an upper floor. The ground floor is very much a working environment. There is a plough on the left and to the right of it a basket of grain ready to be ground into flour. In the middle and towards the back are cooking utensils and storage jars and to the right behind a simple fence an area for animals to be sheltered. A ladder takes you up to the upper floor used for sleeping. And notice the second ladder to take you up to a typically flat roof.

Now this is a small family house and although a more distant member of the family, a cousin perhaps, could also sleep upstairs there isn't enough space for a real guest room and certainly not the *large upper room furnished and ready* described by Mark. But it doesn't take much imagination to see that a larger property could be built on the same arrangement with an upper guest room large enough for Jesus and the disciples. And such a space could be used for visiting members of the extended family and maybe also as an ancient form of B&B with paying guests.

A second example of an upper guest room can be found in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath found in 1 Kings chapter 17. In the story Elijah comes across a widow in the village of Zarephath who is collecting sticks to light a fire to make her last meal with her son because her flour and oil have nearly run out. Elijah asks her to make him some bread and then a miracle takes place in which her flour and oil do not run out. The text then continues as follows.

1 Kings 17:17-24

*After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!" And he said to her, "Give me your son." And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. And he cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives." And the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."*

Notice that Elijah is lodging in an upper chamber where he has his own bed. And it is there that the Lord heals the child.

My third example is not so easy to recognise and we need first to refer back to the earlier reading from Mark and consider the Greek word translated there as guest room.

Mark 14:14 tells us -

*The Teacher says, Where is my **guest room**, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'*

The Greek says: Ὁ διδάσκαλος λέγει Ποῦ ἐστὶν τὸ **κατάλυμά** μου ὅπου τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου φάγω

And the key word translated as guest room is **κατάλυμα** which can be transliterated as **kataluma**.

So where can we find this word elsewhere in the New Testament? The answer is in Luke where we learn about Jesus' birth.

Luke 2:7

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

The last part of this text in Greek says: διότι οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος ἐν τῷ **καταλύματι**

Traditionally the word **kataluma** in Luke 2:7 is translated as inn and we tend to think of an inn keeper turning Mary and Joseph away because there is no room for them to stay. And yet it makes much more sense that they are in a house, a sort of B&B perhaps, possibly of distant relatives, where there is no space in the upper guest room or chamber so they bed down with the animals on the ground floor and it is there that Jesus is born.

So instead of the events of Jesus' final Passover being apparently unconnected with the events of his birth we are presented with the amazing idea that at his birth there was no room for Jesus in the kataluma whereas there was room in the kataluma at the end of his ministry. At the beginning no space could be found for him in the upper guest room but at the end it was there that he taught his disciples and celebrated the Last Supper. In John's gospel Jesus' teaching in this upper room is recorded over five chapters from 13 to 17.

The question this prompts us to ask is surely this – in what way do I have an upper room, a kataluma, and does it have space for the Lord?

In many ways our minds are like a two-story house. There is the ground floor where day to day external life takes place. It is the natural level of everyday experience, where we get on with the business of life. It is where we go in and out. But we also have an upper floor, a spiritual level of inner life and being that is the 'real' us. When we raise our thoughts above our everyday concerns to think about our lives more deeply it is like climbing the stairs to the upper room. And it is in this upper room that we can be spiritually nourished by the Lord in the same way as he fed the disciples at the Last Supper.

How does the Lord come into our lives, how is he born in us today? Can the Lord suddenly appear at the centre of our lives, in our upper room, filling us full with his love and guiding us by his truth? No, because in the beginning there is no room for him in the kataluma, the room is not furnished and it is not ready for him. But even so there can be room for him in our everyday life – he can be born into our lives if we simply accept what he teaches at face value and put it into effect. And it is in our daily lives, in our relationships with others, that we will then begin to experience the transformation that Jesus brings.

He doesn't overwhelm us by breaking into our upper room, instead he quietly and gently comes to us in the simple affairs of external daily living, if we let him. But then we have a choice. We can begin to make the climb upstairs, to prepare for the Lord's presence in our inner spiritual lives, to feed on his goodness and truth. To do this we need to follow the path of repentance. A path which is summarised in these words from the Conference Pledge of Commitment:

*I will seek to overcome all evils in thought, word and action, and strive to do what is good as if of myself, whilst acknowledging that the saving power to do so comes from the Lord alone.*

As we prepare for Easter let us reflect on the journey the Lord made from birth in a manger because there was no guest room on the upper floor to sharing the Last Supper in an upper room that was furnished and ready for him. And let us also reflect on the journey of life we need to make from the moment the Lord is born into our everyday feelings, thoughts and actions to the time when hopefully he is an honoured guest in the upper room of our spiritual life.

[All Bible Quotations from the English Standard Version]