

Haiti, Winter Welfare December 2010

The Bible Companion readings for Sunday include Hebrews 12, and there's an MP3 on this chapter at <http://www.aletheiacollege.net/audio/heb12.mp3>

Last week we reported the baptism of 14 brothers and sisters in Haiti; since then, brothers Nick Cox from the UK and Charlie Klennert from the USA visited the ecclesia in Haiti to attend the one year anniversary of the opening of the ecclesia. Here are some extracts from brother Charlie's diary:

"Met up with brother Nick Cox at the airport this morning. We are in transit to Haiti as I type this out. Looking forward to meeting all the new brothers and sisters as well as seeing some old friends. God is using the brethren to speak His truth in a savaged country. Natural and man made disasters are not keeping people from responding to the truth that is in Christ. To celebrate a year since the initial baptisms.... God you are worthy to be praised. In process home on plane back to the northwest. The experience of going back to Haiti was indeed a dynamic experience. The joy of our brothers and sisters is a contagious thing. Being a witness to how much they are prayed for and loved was indeed humbling and an honor.

Many reflections come to mind after the journey. Going at the same time as elections and the recent outbreak of cholera to the "world" would seem to some quite absurd. Yet at times we need to go out there to support and show our love, to take the chance and be fools for Christ and God's children. What I saw was a country still reeling from the earthquake that happened in January.... Having been there not long after the earthquake, it was obvious that very little reconstruction had been accomplished. To my amazement there were still tents located in the medians and in the middle of the streets... Trash was everywhere, unemployment is at an all time high. Cholera has infected 72,000 people, with more being infected everyday. The election was seen as a hope for many. Hope that maybe, just maybe a new government would help the cleanup effort and restore this tiny country in the Caribbean. The corruption, sadness and pain is evident in the peoples' faces, yet they have not come to a breaking point (just yet)....

Photos: Tent camps near the ecclesia; garbage everywhere



In the midst of the chaos in the outskirts of Carrefour, in the backyard of one of our brothers' cousin's houses there is a light burning for Christ. A lightstand that keeps burning ever brighter. A place of hope, a place of joy filled with singing and ringing the words of the one true gospel. A place of peace, a church which stands different from all the other churches around about Haiti. A place of truth. The return visit was to be a part of their joy. A year anniversary of the beginning of this place of truth. An invite was sent to some brothers who have had a chance to help this

place become what it is today. The call was heard and brother Nick from the UK and I made it down to share in their joy. Directly from the plane we headed to the "backyard of truth" through a maze of streets littered with debris. 45 minutes later we arrived!

Right away you could hear the songs of praise! Music is instrumental to our brethren in Haiti. As we headed down I stayed a bit outside the great tent and shot videos and photos with a brother I had the honor to baptise last March. Looking around it was great to see so many people present, over the past year 46 brothers and sisters have come to know the saving Name of Christ through the waters of baptism. The yard was full of them, friends, neighbors and the orphans whom brother Esmath helps on a regular basis. Kids, young people, middle aged and a few old timers. I remember the oldest lady of the lot pulling me aside afterwards thanking me for coming, and giving me a kiss. I might just have a Haitian grandma now!

The festivities were quite simple. A few balloons, everyone wearing their Sunday best and bringing their best singing voices! Smiles were in abundance, kids were laughing amidst the free range chickens that held a key interest in me... The singing in Haiti is incredible. The passion and all out vocals was a welcomed treat. One day it would be lovely to get some better recordings of it to share with all who would like to hear. As it is, I am praying it sounds as good on the videos I was able to snap. Maybe it was the atmosphere, or it hit a chord with my past that had me smiling the whole time they sang for the LORD!

Photos: The anniversary meeting under canvass; brothers Nick and Charlie



With the singing calmed down brother Nick stood up and gave a wonderful talk, tying in how the elections will not solve all of their problems, but there is an official who will, Jesus, and we pray for Him to return daily. I also gave a short talk about how we throughout yhe world experience their joy as well. Letting them know they are not alone, how so very many pray for them and how excited we get when we hear of others in Haiti coming to Christ. After the "visitor" talks, brother Esmath gave an impassioned talk on the joy of being in Christ. He stood up and thanked Nick and I profusely for being there, to the point of embaressment. He mentioned how our journey was an incredible act of love with tears in his eyes.

After some prayers and a song we were all awarded a meal of thanks to celebrate this joyous occasion. Rice, chicken, peas, beans, traditional caribbean cuisine. It was a joy to be able to help finance such a meal, the work and effort of our sisters in preparing and serving this meal was extraordinary, being thee was close to 100 people there! It was one of the few things brother Esmath has asked for help with. Nick and I wandered around giving greetings to old friends and new friends alike until it was time to head back to the hotel.

Photo: Enjoying the meal



On the ride to the Hotel we chatted at length with Esmath and his cousin about the elections, the state of Haiti and about the welfare of our brothers and sisters. As we said our good byes, Nick and I headed to our room. We chatted late into the night about our experience. "How can we express this in a way our brothers and sisters throughout the world can understand?", I asked Nick. His reply, "you can't, unless you experience it yourself.". Those words ring out in my mind as I type this out on a plane back to the northwest. I have the pictures, videos and thoughts, but it will all pale with being in Haiti. So hopefully with the accounts of both brother Nick and I it will at least give you a glimpse.

With the elections on Sunday, Nick and I were stuck in the hotel for fear of the violence that was expected. There were a few spots of violence, but the election went off better than anyone would have thought. Brother Esmath came to visit us, with all traffic at a standstill for the election he walked 45 minutes to come and see us. We chatted and spoke of what needs they have. A few small items which we helped him with were all he asked for. He was overjoyed with the French materials I brought him and have sent him. He was especially fond of the "Le Cle" ["Key to Understanding The Scriptures" by Bro HP Mansfield] pamphlet books a dear sister in eastern Canada sent me to give them. As we talked about what was needed, he kept coming back to how he and the rest of them want the message of truth to spread through Haiti like a "virus". With only four brothers working, and all of our brothers and sisters now in safe accommodations (none are in tents any longer) they simply want to proclaim the truths we all know and hold dear..

We said our goodbyes and Esmath headed home with a load of books and other supplies we had brought (the salt tablets Nick brought and other medicines were.

On reflection in the airport as brother Nick and I were headed back on our journeys home. We smiled about how far they have come, and the infectious joy they have when speaking about the oracles of God. There is a lightstand in Haiti. A great work is happening there. A place of truth in a backyard about 45 minutes away from Port-au-Prince. And for that I am thankful, amazed and just plain happy about!

In His service,
Brother Charlie Klennert"

Brother Esmath subsequently wrote:

"Dear my Brothers and my Friends,

I do not know if I have to start from top or the bottom by telling you how delighted and Blessed I am the fact that I am writing you these lines in order to salute you from the bottom of my heart for being ready and available for God's ministry . Last night in our meeting, I was telling the people what your presence means for the church, probably they did not really understand such love you were showing and proving by leaving your country just to be in my Haiti.

There is nothing and absolutely nothing you could do to prove your love towards us than accepting to come and to be with us, while even native Haitians who live in the United States forbade their own family to come to Haiti. We cannot minimize this great gesture and the proof of the real love you have taught me personally.

It gives me more zeal and determination to keep spreading the word of God every time I remember that I am not alone on that difficult road. I praise the Lord for driving you back safely to you family. Please do not forget this ministry in your daily prayer so that the heart of these people could be sensible to the voice of God through His word. My Dream as I said to you Brothers is to spread the Gospel that I am preaching like a virus, so that the whole nation could be contaminated.

Hope to see you next year in a crowded church with more than 100 and more baptized people in the real name.

My love and my regards to your Family first and secondly to every and single person that I do not know who contributes to that ministry."

Carelinks really are appreciative of the huge efforts and generosity shown towards the needy brothers and sisters in Haiti, and we give thanks for the growth of the word here.

WINTER WELFARE

Likewise we give thanks for the growth of the Riga Bible Centre, where last Sunday attendance went through the 100 mark, nearly all baptized. The chronic cold weather in northern Europe has been widely advertised on the media- lowest ever temperatures in many areas for this time of year, huge snowfall bringing life to a halt in many areas, homeless people freezing to death all over. In a situation like Riga, where we have dozens of brethren and sisters living in night shelters and having to be on the street all day, this has serious consequences. We've been running

around doing what we can. The economic situation means that the roads and footpaths aren't being salted much; old folk are terribly frightened to walk on the sheet ice. So we've taken the initiative of buying many bags of road salt and distributing it on the sidewalks around our meeting place- the old folks walk between their high rise blocks to the shops on cleared asphalt, and obviously they ask "Why? Who cleared this?". At this time we are providing a larger than usual number of warm drinks and meals each week; your support is really going to be needed this Winter to keep it all going.

We mentioned last time the problem of racist attacks on our asylum seeker brethren; here's one of them last Sunday taking shelter from the biting cold in the door well of our old meeting place [this Sunday will be our first meeting in our new meeting place]; our brother had taken the early morning bus to avoid trouble from the skinhead groups and so arrived very early.



Not all asylum seekers are successful, some are sent back to where they came from. This was the case with brother Guy, baptized in the refugee camp near Riga, after a lengthy study of Bible Basics. He was returned to Cameroon, from whence he has emailed us saying that he is sharing the doctrines of the Truth in a classroom in a village in rural Cameroon, West Africa. It's amazing how God works, in bringing people huge distances around the world to learn the Truth and then sending them further to share the pearl of great price with others. Here's the photo he just sent us:



With love and deep gratitude from your brothers and sisters of Carelinks

POSTSCRIPT: Brother Nick Cox's report on the Haiti visit has just come through:

Haiti Revisited

The Haiti ecclesia were organising a celebration to mark their first anniversary on 28th November and I was invited. During my previous visit I'd said I would try to return and this seemed like a great opportunity to meet up with the brothers and sisters in less traumatic circumstances. Having accepted the invite and sorted out flights the first problem came to light. The British government was advising against all travel to Haiti, particularly to the Carrefour district of Port-au-Prince and specifically at the end of November since the elections were due

to take place then. Kidnappings and lawlessness is rife and civil unrest was expected. Soon after reading this advice I received an email from Esmath telling me that the celebration had had to be moved to the Saturday from the Sunday since this was the day of the elections and no private vehicles were to be allowed to move. It was going to be tight as my flight wasn't due to land until early Saturday afternoon and the celebration was to start not long after. If I had been a little dubious about this visit before I was even more so now. My concerns began to grow when news started to come through of a cholera outbreak. I started to think maybe God is trying to tell me something. Initially my thought was that God was saying I shouldn't go, but then I started to investigate cholera treatment and realised that it was simple to treat and I could actually take some rehydration salts with me to give to the brothers and sisters in case they were affected. So it seemed that God was trying to tell me something; that I should go and shouldn't doubt as I could provide some practical help as well as spiritual encouragement.

Even though the brothers and sisters had never asked for any help with necessities my guilt at spending so much on a pastoral visit had prompted me to plan to take some clothes with me to donate. Then news of hurricanes and tropical storms hitting Haiti hit the headlines, so I knew that the need here would be even greater. So what looked to be a much easier trip was showing signs that it would be as difficult a situation as my first visit and every bit as needful. I suppose in the months in between I had forgotten just how difficult life was in Haiti but these events were reminding me that little had really changed in those ten months. I met Charlie at JFK airport New York, and the speed with which we became friends was a strong reminder of the positive aspect of being a worldwide family in Christ.

Flying into Haiti highlighted two issues which had been less obvious when I'd driven there on my previous trip. Firstly many of the Haitian passengers around me were unable to fill in their customs declarations so the job fell to the few who were able to read and write. Secondly the lack of trees was a stark contrast in scenery when flying into Haiti compared to the other Caribbean islands I'd visited. Brother Esmath met us at the airport after we'd run the gauntlet of taxi drivers vying for business and even begging for a few dollars. I'd been trying to phone Rachel since we landed but my mobile wouldn't work, which surprised me since when I was here two weeks after the earthquake my mobile worked fine. It was no surprise to Charlie though as the last time he'd been here he hadn't been able to use his. I knew local mobiles were working and Esmath kindly sent a text to Rachel (although it never got through so she spent the night wondering if I was safe).

We set off straight to the celebration and as Esmath's cousin drove us there it soon became clear that little had changed in the last ten months since the earthquake. Those whose houses were still standing had now returned to living indoors instead of on the streets and many of the makeshift tents had been replaced by proper, more substantial tents; but other than that there was no obvious evidence of where all the aid money was being spent. Whilst I must stress that this was purely from my perspective it was a view shared by the brothers living there. Despite this Haitians seem to be extremely resilient and life was carrying on as normal amongst the rubbish and rubble.

Esmath was worried what sort of chaos the following days elections would bring (“it could be midnight at noon” was the phrase he used), so he wanted to make sure we had provisions for the next day. We pulled in to a supermarket passed the armed guards at the car park entrance. But another armed guard just inside the doorway of the supermarket stopped us and wouldn’t let us pass. He said something to Esmath and pointed to the man sat with a bucket at the doorway. Everyone had to have their hands disinfected as they came into the supermarket. Obviously the cholera epidemic was being taken seriously, although there were no such precautions at the second supermarket we stopped at (the queues at the first were too long and we needed to get to the celebrations). Food and drink seemed to be in plentiful supply but whether or not it was affordable is hard to say. The fact that only 4 of the now 46 baptised brothers and sisters actually have a job would suggest many goods and services would be beyond their means.

As we arrived at the church the celebration sounded to be in full swing. Even though it had been just over 2 weeks since the earthquake when I was last at the church I’d remembered just how much effort everyone had made to look smart. So this time rather than just jeans and a t-shirt I had made sure I brought a shirt and tie, which I quickly put on before joining in the celebration (a little too quickly as anyone who sees Charlie’s video will notice as I didn’t finish the knot in my tie). It seemed odd from my perspective just how smart the brothers and sisters looked, both now and back then, given the hardships the Haitians were facing but slowly through this trip it dawned on me just how much their priorities lay with serving God first.

Memories came flooding back as we entered through the narrow gate in the wall into the yard where the church meets. Brother Williere was leading songs and there was a wonderful sense of praise and worship with everyone joining in. It was great to see everyone enjoying themselves as I was ushered to the front. It was even better to see so many faces I recognised and even more that I didn’t. But it was a little sad not to see some faces that I’d hoped to see. Esmath explained later that a couple of the brothers who had been so helpful the last time I’d been here were no longer involved in the church, so I hope you’ll all join me in praying that they’ll decide to return.

As I sat looking around and soaking up the atmosphere I noticed there had been a few changes in the yard. Instead of a hole in the ground there were proper toilets which Carelinks has previously reported. Instead of a dusty floor there was now concrete. Instead of a piece of tarpaulin acting as a roof there was now a sturdy marquee and instead of makeshift benches made from planks of wood resting on concrete blocks there were now chairs (not enough for everyone and some of these had been hired). Instead of thirty mosquito bites there were none.

Charlie and I were each invited to speak by Bro Esmath and it was an opportunity to share with the brothers and sisters how we really are a world wide family. It was also an opportunity to let the many visitors know a bit of the true Bible teaching which Esmath and the church are ceaselessly spreading to the people in Haiti.

The big disappointment was that due to the elections there was a vehicle curfew which started at 8pm on Saturday and was to last all the following day, so we only had a few hours with our

brothers and sisters. Nonetheless it was a real privilege to have been invited to share in this celebration. Sometimes we can be so focused on correct doctrine that we can forget to enjoy and celebrate what we believe, but this had been a time to enjoy and praise God and I for one was all the better for it. Despite the earthquake, despite the hurricane, despite the cholera, despite the violence, despite the election curfew, despite all this adversity and more the brothers and sisters in Haiti had a day dedicated to rejoicing and praising our Father and his Christ for all that they have done.

The following day Esmath made the potentially perilous journey to our hotel on foot. As we chatted and discussed the needs of the brothers and sisters it slowly started to dawn on me that welfare was not what they wanted. From news reports and what I'd witnessed I would say there was a great need for welfare, but I guess culturally and historically many Haitians had little before the earthquake and they still have little now, so they're used to fending for themselves with the little they do have. What they do want help with is in accommodating the increasing numbers at the meeting and help to further spread the good news of the true gospel.

It was humbling to realise that we should not try to dictate what type of assistance we should give but that we should try to help with the type of assistance that is requested even if it doesn't fit in with our pre-conceived idea of what these poor brothers and sisters need. Their view is that they need God first and foremost and they also need to preach, and it's getting results so we should listen and try to be there for them and support in the way they want. Without realising it Charlie and I had done so much just by being there.

Whilst we were chatting Esmath's mobile rang. It was his wife, she was checking that he was ok as there'd been gun fire in their neighbourhood. A few minutes later and a brother rang also warning of gun fire. Esmath seemed more concerned about us being able to get to the airport the following day should the election situation deteriorate, but he was confident that the angel of the Lord would be with us (and he was right). So as Esmath made his way home all we could do was pray he had a safe journey.

On my journey home I was left feeling more than a little ashamed. These brothers and sisters who are "poor" by world standards are so much richer than me. I went to Haiti with an arrogant attitude of "I can help you with your physical needs," even though no such help had been asked for. I came back realising that it was me who needed help to become spiritually richer. I was taught a valuable lesson about getting my priorities right. To worry less about what I'll eat tomorrow, how I'll dress today or where I'll sleep tonight. The Haitian ecclesias faith and dedication to God epitomises the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Their priorities and focus are on God and so they trust wholeheartedly that He will provide for their physical needs. Can we help and support our Haitian brothers and sisters? Yes, but let's not try to force our values onto them, rather let us learn to adopt the Christ like values that they display even in the most difficult of circumstances.