

Impressions of 2nd time visitors, Iraq, Haiti November 2010

The Bible Companion readings for Sunday are from Hosea 11, and there's an MP3 study on this chapter at <http://aletheiacollege.net/audio/hos11.mp3>

Latvia November 2010 – Bible School

This is our second trip to Latvia – a country with a split personality – overrun by the Germans and the USSR in the past and populated by large numbers of Russians who despised the Latvians, but now governed by Latvians who resent the remaining Russians. There are many disenfranchised people here. It's difficult to cope with life if you don't belong anywhere and are not wanted wherever you go. Yet within this country an ecclesia is growing, in which of all nations seem to be present – former enemies breaking bread with each other, refugees doing their best to show love to each other, former atheists debating the Truth - keen to understand the deeper aspects of the gospel. Queuing up to help – any job given is treated as a privilege.

Photos: African brother, Iranian asylum seeker brother, assisting British pensioners in their mid 70s to install toilets, kitchen and shower at the new meeting hall this week; almost blind brother Vlad works every hour he can keep awake in doing things on the job. He assembles cabinets, drills flooring into concrete, even mixes concrete and tries to level it- and then comes up to a British brother, points to his own failing eyes, points to the job needing to be done [e.g. to level the concrete hhe has just mixed, poured, and is getting into trouble trying to level due to failed eyesight]- and so the work proceeds. A building built by the blind, the rejected, the elderly, the lonely [all between them having so many talents]- is surely pleasing to God:



Never before have I felt such frustration at not being able to communicate in a foreign language. There are so many brothers and sisters there who now know us, yet we have so few words to be able to converse with them. This is the second opportunity to come and talk about the demanding subject of forgiving each other and again I was aware how much these people have to teach me. I have had so little go wrong in my life – so much to be thankful for and I am humbled by those who come to Christ following their catastrophic losses. One brother can remember the face of the soldier who led his father away to his death. Another whose family were wiped out in Northern Russian. One extremely cheerful brother whose life story could have featured in a Solzhenitsyn novel, a sister who fears that her pension will not even pay for the heating bill, a brother turfed out the hospital to die of cancer. Carelinks are trying to assist all of them.

Photo: Visiting brother Valerij, in the last stages of his battle with cancer, dying at home



But there is a community growing here who are hungry for the Truth and for doing the Lord's work – however small that duty. A brother who counts it a privilege to do a bit of plumbing work – a sister who is always doing the washing up – a team who keep the ecclesial room spotless. And with rapt attention I try to teach them a bit from the scriptures – they who really have so much to

teach me about finding the Lord in the midst of atheism. We looked at the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers – jealousy, betrayal, lust, lies, violence – stories that are just stories for many of us, yet are real reflections of their experiences. How did Joseph manage to forgive? We thought about the time it takes; the trust needed in God; the choice to not retaliate; what we might do ourselves and how we can learn to control our feelings – torn between anger and the desire to do the Lord’s will and forgive. I mean, how do you forgive your alcoholic son who steals from you and threatens you with violence if you don’t give money, but you only have a few pounds a month to live on? How do you cope when there is open racism and violent skinheads on the bus and you are a lonely black-skinned brother and you don’t speak the language and have no rights or protection? Or when your family is split apart by an uncaring government in the UK, and you are forced to seek asylum in Latvia and you can’t help your wife in the UK with their sick baby and you haven’t even seen your new-born daughter? What do you say to someone who was persistently neglected in hospital after a stroke and is now permanently disabled?

I do not know most of their life stories, yet their desire for the gift of forgiving in the name of Jesus shone from many faces. I have never spoken to such an attentive audience as I challenged them to be like Jesus and forgive as he forgave. And after the first talk, a contact called PAULS who has been attending the meetings for some time and studying the Gospel, came forward with a huge beam on his face and asked to be baptised. He too wanted to enter the saving grace of Jesus and become a forgiving son of God. We talked next about the grace of God through Jesus His son. We thought first about what sin is and the many facets of sin that separate us from God. We tried to get our minds round the wonder that God has forgiven and will continue to forgive us absolutely. Yet this teaching challenges some to the core. If in a previous life you have served in the army system as an atheist– and we know what that may have meant in terms of brutality given and received – just how do you convince such a brother, scarred by the things he has done, and broken in sorrow for those he hurt, that God has completely forgiven him? Sometimes all you can do is to listen and love them and comfort them and try to show them that there are Biblical parallels – Paul persecuted the church which he later preached to. His key verse must have been, ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am worst. Yet for this very purpose he poured out his grace on me...’

Photo: Baptism of Brother Pauls; distributing the bread and wine in the crowded meeting room using the new cups and holding plate beautifully crafted by a British brother



And then we talked about the lives of others who have forgiven. Those whose lives were broken by events yet determined to forgive against all the odds. We were inspired by examples of our brothers and sisters who over the years have persisted in following Jesus’ example through their anger, grief and frustration. Trying to do a small bit to make the world a little more gracious. I hope that some of them will write their stories about how they have learned to forgive - ‘releasing the past’ as one sister explained to me in broken English. They can inspire us as they walk forward in this little backwater of Europe – patiently and faithfully waiting for the enduring city whose builder is God.

Steve & Sue Gretton

HAITI

We are pleased to say that to date, the ecclesia hasn't personally been touched by either the lethal hurricane which brushed Haiti, nor by the cholera epidemic which has claimed over 750 lives in the last few weeks there. We give thanks for this.

IRAQ

Readers may have noticed on the media that there have been a spate of attacks against Christians in Iraq with many deaths and declarations that the Christian community there must either leave Iraq or be killed. You may recall that Carelinks visited Iraq and baptized a brother there in May. Our prayers should be with him at this time.

With love from your brothers and sisters of Carelinks