

COR Newsletter – 10 December 2008

Dear all,

### **Last Sunday**

Thanks to John Barker for leading the service while I was away. It was good to get back. Esther and I had a great deal of trouble lighting the Second Advent candle but we made it in the end! I really take my hat off to Frans, Dagmar & other helpers who manage to rehearse with upwards of 15 children in such a small room - but they are making great progress. Another healthy congregation heard the Advent message of hope expressed in the various Bible readings. The candle lit this week represented the tradition of the prophets.

*For info. the system we use for what the Advent candles represent is as follows; the Patriarchs - the Prophets - John the Baptist - Mary - Jesus.*

The produce sale was also very successful. Thank you to all who provided the goodies and those who bought and enjoyed them.

### **Next Sunday**

**Morning Prayer with Nativity Play at 10am.** As Frans announced on Sunday could **parents with children in the play** please try to be **at church for 9.15 this morning** to prepare and rehearse please!! Alison will lead the service.

### **Next Sunday in Sofia**

Holy Communion at 9.30am. Also later that same day a traditional **Christmas carol service** will be held at 18.00 on Sunday 14 December at the Residence of the British Ambassador, 36 Vassil Levski Boulevard. The service will be followed by mulled wine and mince pies. If you would like to attend, please register in advance by email to [alex.michailova@mbox.contact.bg](mailto:alex.michailova@mbox.contact.bg) or by telephone 0887 423 872.

### **This Evening (Wednesday)**

at 7pm we have a church council meeting in church.

### **Chance encounters and lovely surprises!**

A few weeks ago a lady called Mary Little attended our church in Bucharest. Mary returned to the UK and enthused about the service (and the ... ahem ... preaching) and told a fellow resident - a retired priest. When told that the chaplain's name was Jacques he said - "is that Martin Jacques?". Through a mutual acquaintance the retired priest had heard about me. His name turned out to be **Leslie Houlden**, a man I could not do without. His Bible commentaries produced with John Rogerson are invaluable to me - they go with me everywhere and are always my first port of call when I want to really understand and get to grips with a reading and its context. I was honoured and surprised that Leslie then sent me a lovely email, glad in the knowledge that something he produced is really helping people. Be assured Leslie that it does, and will do for a long time yet.

### **Congratulations**

To the Reverend Steve Hughes. Steve, a former chaplain of the COR and who of course helped me in the service here only two weeks ago, has just been appointed as the new "Inter - faith development officer" for churches together in Lancashire. We pray for Steve in this ever more important task in multi -faith Britain.

**Other important Christmas service dates! Note: An a4 poster advertising our Christmas services is attached to this email. Please circulate or put up at your place of work, school etc.....**

Wednesday 17th December at 7pm - Nine lessons and Carols followed by Minced pies and mulled wine kindly provided by "Chez Marie".

Sunday 21st December at 6pm - Romanian carols sung by the choir of the Domnita Balasa church, in the Church of the Resurrection Bucharest.

Christmas eve - Midnight mass which starts at 11.30 pm

Christmas day - Holy Communion at 10am.

### **Christmas party**

There is also going to be a **church Christmas party** at the home of Lillah and John Houghton on Saturday 20th December. There will be a modest entrance charge. More details next week.

### **Thought for the day.**

With Steve's news fresh in my mind, and the Mumbai massacre only a few days old, I saw a fascinating programme about Islam the other night - more specifically about the Koran in particular. We could do with a lot more intelligent and insightful programmes about other religions to allow us to see beyond the harrowing headlines to some possible causes. In many ways Islam is divided along the same fault lines as Christianity. The Sunnis are like our protestants, accentuating a direct relationship with God unmediated by any clergy or professionally religious people. The Shia are more like Catholic Christianity with a professional and hierarchical clergy and allowing the venerating of saints and praying to them to intercede for them (anathema to the Sunni). The Shia Holy city of Qom in Iran was even likened to an Islamic "Vatican city".

The Muslims, like Christians, are mainly divided over the interpretation of a Holy Book. The stern fundamentalist Islam that haunts our imaginations is comparatively modern and has basically been largely formed and underwritten by Saudi Arabia, who, awash with money and controlling the Holy sites, have spent an estimated 100 Billion dollars to spread their own uncompromising hard-line (and historically unrepresentative) brand of Islam around the Muslim world which includes adulterated Korans (with Saudi inspired anti Jewish and anti Christian remarks added), and funding extremist Islamic educational establishments all over the globe.

To show the changes that have taken place the programme showed a film of the funeral of Egypt's leader Colonel Nasser in Cairo attended by over three million people. The weird thing is for someone used to the modern Middle East - *Not one* single veiled woman can be seen.....

The wearing of the veil, now so ubiquitous in modern Egypt, was unknown there in 1974 according to a female Egyptian commentator Money certainly does talk doesn't it? - and Saudi petrodollars are now bellowing around the world. In a little over thirty years the whole tone of a religion has been changed in Egypt. It is frightening how a historically tolerant religion with so many variants as Islam can mutate so quickly into the fundamentalist monster it has become in so many places through money and

modern electronic propaganda. Within thirty years, Saudi Arabia has almost managed to bend out of shape an entire world religion. 15 of the 9/11 bombers were Saudi citizens. Osama Bin Laden is a Saudi billionaire.

I don't think I need to draw out the obvious parallels with what has been happening, and could happen to any religion if we drop our guard. Misinformation and distortion, if repeated often enough and going unchallenged has a fair chance of becoming the new reality. Millions of Muslims now think that Saudi inspired Wahhabi Islam is the only "real" and true Islam there is, and already too many ordinary people now think that a literal reading of the Bible is the only way to be a "real" Christian (so they wisely never come near us) - never knowing the truth that biblical literalism is a twentieth century phenomenon invented in America. I believe that thinking people of good will from all the world's faiths need to get together to fight this unholy onslaught against God and humanity. A moment of great insight came to me some years ago now when I realised that spiritually I had much more in common with a Sufi Muslim than I did with fundamentalist Christians. Strange but true. Christians and Muslims alike - we face a common enemy - people who want to create a religion in which the love of a merciful God for all mankind, the bedrock of both religions, has been successfully expunged, leaving in its place a grotesque, vindictive, inhumane religion that exists to control and crush the human spirit.

Instead of a prayer for today this is **a meditation** from the mystical Sufi tradition of Islam called "Following the Way". The coincidence here of course is that this is what the original Jesus followers were called - followers of "the Way". The Sufis - peace loving Muslim liberals who believe in the universal love of God and the equality of men and women (and draws together both Sunni and Shia) - are under fierce attack today all over the Muslim world for offering a different version of Islam. As we Christians prepare to celebrate Emmanuel - God with us - this Christmas - May they be sure that this same God is with them as they suffer the onslaught.

*This is a lesson on following the Way. Remember it.*

*How do you follow the way?*

*Go where you are sent.*

*Wait till you are shown what to do.*

*Do it with the whole self.*

*Remain until you have done what you were sent to do.*

*Walk away with empty hands.*

*How much will it cost?*

*The cost is everything, for all you are and all you have  
will be asked of you before the journey runs its course.*

*How will you know your fellow travellers?*

*Their faces are marked by the scars of love.*

*No one will tell you that the way is easy: only that it is possible.*

*No one can tell you if the journey is worthwhile,  
for your wages are concealed in the hand of God,  
and will be shown you only on the last day of eternity.*

*But whoever chooses to follow the way*

*will have the joyous company of God's beloved fools as fellow travellers,  
and a resting place, at journey's end, in the Mecca of the heart.*

*This is the lesson on following the Way. Remember it.*

Love and peace

Martin