

COR Newsletter – 18 February 2009

Dear all,

Last Sunday in Sofia

A large congregation including four children this week. It has been a real pleasure seeing this community grow and develop over the past year. **Our singing** impressed the RC priest so much (he arrived just as we were finishing our service), he has asked that someone from our congregation stays and helps to lead the singing at the catholic service, and has hinted that he would look favourably on closer collaboration between our two communities - which is great news. This was the largest congregation for quite a while even though we were missing a few regulars. Our prayers were of course especially with Chris, who is staying in Tasmania for the time being. I spotted our new dad Gino receiving bags of baby clothes from "old hand" Jonathan after the service - Love to Mira and Svetta and Gabriel and Emmanuel. Thanks as ever to Steve and Fiona, the British ambassador and his wife for putting me up!

Last Sunday in Skopje

Speaking of **good singing**, John tells me that the 8 people who came to this young church congregation on Sunday sounded more like 30 people, it was so loud!

Last Sunday in Bucharest

I have had reported that the service went well and with a few new visitors as well. I look forward to seeing everyone again next week. I understand that some people have asked for the transcript of the talk - it was so good!! I know how good it was because I was sent a sneak preview of it a couple of days beforehand and the way the subject "Why bad things happen to good people" was handled, a simple but constant objection to belief for many people, was so good and well written that I wish I had been there myself to hear it presented!! Well done everybody who had a part in the service.

THE BRITANNIA BALL

We are on the last lap now, with all the loose ends now to tie up. I, myself, am only now starting (just) to look forward to Friday night. It looks as though we will have the same amount of people as last year. In fact if there is a late flourish we may even exceed the figures for last year!! Everything is set in motion and of course there will be some last minute shocks and scares but all our hard work will I'm sure bear fruit in a wonderful, memorable and profitable night for the Church of the Resurrection. See you there.

A flying visit from a benefactor

This Tuesday lunchtime I met with **James Price** from the Christian Mission Society of Ireland who was making a brief visit to Romania. For those new to the church CMSI granted 7,500 Euro over three years to our church to buy a car to make the task of getting to Sofia more cost effective and travel more flexible. I assured James of our gratitude for this gift, and CMSI for their part are glad that their money was put to such good use.

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday 25th February is "Ash Wednesday" the beginning of the season of Lent. We will mark this day with a service of Holy Communion at 7pm with the imposition of ashes if desired.

Where is all the money going?

On this last trip to Sofia, the roads were in the worst shape I have experienced since I started driving there. The roads South from Bucharest to the Danube are now in appalling shape. You have to almost stop dead now on the road to manoeuvre around holes in which you could lose a small house. And there has been bridge tax to enable "maintenance" (Ho Ho) of the friendship bridge over the Danube for as long as I can remember. Funny thing is, I can't remember any maintenance actually ever being done, and the approach roads to the bridge are now in the same appalling state as the roads leading to it. Don't you just love it here?

Signs of the times

It was heartening to see Jews in New York demonstrating against the policies of the state of Israel in Gaza outside a Zionist centre. Orthodox and secular, grandmothers and even holocaust survivors held placards saying "Not in OUR name".

Signs of the times (2) - What a sick world we live in

An English lawyer Davis Mills has been sentenced to 41/2 years in prison for receiving \$600.000 in Bribes from Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to withhold incriminating evidence against him. The Italian leader who bribed him (Tony Blair's great mate), and one of the richest men in Italy is immune from prosecution of course. One rule for the rich and powerful.....

Thought for the day

With the world seemingly entering a recession if not a full blown depression it has been suggested to me by quite a few people that the church will now see growth, because when times are hard people will turn to religion because there is nothing else left to do, or perhaps it will give them hope in dark times. On the face of it the logic seems valid - along the lines of people only pray when they are in trouble and need help - (a famous saying goes "There are no atheists in foxholes"). I know you can prove just about anything with statistics, but if I remember by courses in sociology correctly when I was at theological college, the surprising thing is that exactly the opposite appears to be the case. In Britain, the numbers of people going to church increased in the 1950's and 1960's, after periods of growth and a feeling of security and economic prosperity abounded. You can actually construct quite a good argument that when times are hard people are too preoccupied with mere survival to have much time for religion.

I personally don't think that the economic situation has too much of an impact on church attendance, or at least it is just one amongst many. There are too many other factors, cultural, political and social to deal with. The USA is the richest country in the world and has huge figures for church attendance. Sweden is also very rich, and church attendance is the lowest in the world (in common with all of Scandinavia), yes, even lower than secular Britain. The reasons continue to perplex students of religion - and I don't want to go into them all here.

Jesus came that we might have "life in all its fullness". Fullness of life, being aware of our place as a person in whom God delights as a part of a divinely created universe rather than a piece of meat in an amoral unfriendly pointless universe. Life

having eternal import, worth and purpose rather than insignificance and worthlessness. A universe where Good and Evil and Love are real rather than man made constructs - figments of our imaginations serving the purpose of the "selfish gene" and survival.

Understanding yourself as a much loved child of God rather than a temporary unimportant accident of nature.

These differences between a Christian understanding of life and an atheistic understanding of life don't depend on whether you have money and security, or are broke and insecure. They transcend economics - they are facets of the Kingdom of God - and are valid no matter how much money you have. They are the difference between a fuller understanding of life and an impoverished one.

Someone who is rich financially can have life in all its fullness (though I seem to remember that it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven) but if that man suddenly becomes poor he still has fullness of life, knowing that he is a child of God, and that his economic situation means absolutely nothing to God.

How and why people are drawn to religion are many and various - the downturn may draw some people for all I know - but it is still a mystery as to why some believe and some don't. And for those who don't, it is certainly not for us to judge them - but what we can do is offer them a way into a deeper understanding of their own life, the world and other people revealed to us by Jesus Christ that doesn't depend on economics.

There is an ancient belief that there is a divine spark in everybody and everything. If we go with that idea, surely our role in the church is to fan that spark until it glows brightly with the light of God. Elizabeth Barrett Browning once said that the earth is ablaze with the fire of God, but only those who see it take their shoes off, the rest sit around and pick blackberries.

The prayer for today is from the Bible. A prayer of St. Paul in Ephesians 1: 14 - 21

Father, I fall on my knees before you.

I ask you from the wealth of your glory

to give me power through your spirit to be strong in my inner self.

I pray that Christ will make his home in my heart,

that I may have the power to understand,

how broad and long, how high and deep,

is Christ's love.

For by means of your power working in me

you are able to do so much more than I can ever ask for, or even think of.

To you Father, be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus

for all time, for ever and ever!

Amen

Love and Peace

Martin