

It must be Love: thoughts on Europe

One of my regular routines, to the intense embarrassment of my family, is that whenever I meet a European, especially from the former Communist bloc, I simply have to ask where they're from - I can't stop myself. I have usually been to their hometown over the years and then have a story to tell. Recently I was in Brno in the Czech Republic and told a conference how I had been arrested and blacklisted from the former Czechoslovakia. In Macedonia I tell tales of my friends who were convicted and imprisoned in Skopje for distributing portions of the New Testament. Maribor in Slovenia is the border town where I was convicted, fined and ejected for smuggling Bibles. In case you get the impression it's all courtroom stories, there was being punched square on the jaw in a wedding brawl in a hotel lobby in central Warsaw; all while working as a Christian missionary! I could also take you to the stretch of road in Yugoslavia where I was miraculously delivered from a head on crash or the East German stretch of autobahn where we had to hitchhike at 4am with a broken down camper van. Other moments include being shot at by a Russian soldier while driving across a muddy field in Hungary or being caught at Moscow airport smuggling printers' ink to serve the underground church. Of course the most life-changing memories are of meeting the faithful Christian families who were persecuted under communism and risked lengthy prison sentences, purely for being faithful followers of Christ. All this was in Europe barely 30 years ago.

Jumping forward I have now been the Europe guy with 24-7 Prayer; a youth focused prayer and mission movement; for 16 years. I have spoken on the streets of St Petersburg, led prayer in cathedrals, worked with clubbers on the beer stained streets of San Antonio, Ibiza, and seen the black mafia Bentleys cruising the streets in Moldova. I could take you to a house there where teenage girls are trafficked to the west; nothing can be done because of official collusion. I have taken night trains down the spine of the Balkans and up into the neglected corners of Germany in mid January. I have spoken to youngsters in a Roma gypsy camp, drunk coffee and played music in late night Turkish cafes, stayed with families in Northern Spain, on the pilgrimage route of the Camino de Santiago, and even contributed to consultations with Catholic Bishops in the Vatican. I have slept on couches, floors, spare rooms and even an occasional luxury apartment!

I have studied the stories that have shaped this strange peninsula we call Europe. The terrible rivalries, tribal conflicts and battles as Empires clashed. It is worth remembering that only 100 years ago over 300,000 Europeans perished in the mud of the Somme just a short drive from Brussels and the centre of what we now call the European Union. It has been said that the only thing that gives

Europe its sense of shared identity is its common, transformative experience of the Christian gospel. Each country has its heroes; there are the pioneers, the monastic movements, the reformers, the revivalists and the social reformers. Names like Wilberforce, Methodius, Cyril, Huss, Wesley, Aidan, Ignatius and Francis led movements of transformation in all four corners of the continent. In particular I have loved studying perhaps the only really positive legacy of the empires; the mission movements. Europeans who, in their tens of thousands, gave up promising careers, health and even their lives to share the love of Christ. I think of CT Studd, an England cricketer who gave away his aristocratic inheritance to share God's love in uncharted China and Africa; as he entered his seventies and saw the gospel begin to flourish in Africa it was said that his body was a 'museum of diseases'. Today, outside Europe, the Christian church is growing dramatically – this is the legacy of missionaries like Studd, Robert Morrison or Amy Carmichael.

So, over four decades, I have criss-crossed this wonderful continent time and again. Without doubt the most significant part of this journey has been the hundreds of friendships developed with young activists and old heads, united by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a desire to be filled and led by His Spirit. It has been fulfilling and hard work but, as I am increasingly realizing, it has also been a pilgrimage; a journey of discovery and presence. As youthful naivety has matured I have become more convinced that this has not primarily been about me shaping Europe; every mile, every meal, every surprise encounter and meeting has shaped me. It may sound dramatic but sometimes I feel as if I carry Europe in my bones and when I travel further afield I also do it as a representative of my continent.

Last autumn was a lifetime highlight: the movement I'm part of met in the Austrian capital of Vienna, where I lived and started my European pilgrimage. As tens of thousands of refugees poured through the city, Priests, pastors, missionaries and 4000 (predominantly young) people gathered on the last evening in St Stephen's cathedral. There, regardless of denominational or church label, we worshipped without restraint and the Holy Spirit fell. Some, in tears, commented that this is what they had dreamed of for many decades. If ever there was a glimpse of hope for a new Europe this was it as thousands of young people went out, full of passion, to make a difference with their lives. The following morning as the event drew to a glorious conclusion I chatted to a missionary veteran who had also lived and ministered in Vienna. We agreed it had been a fantastic and exuberant time before Tommie, with his typically dry, Swedish understatement commented, "you know I can really sense the storm clouds gathering here in Europe."

With no comment on the rights or wrongs of the Brexit referendum, as it approached, I had a growing sense of dread. The undercurrent of lies, nationalism and racism was troubling, but after the murder of pro-EU MP Jo Cox, labeled as a national traitor, circumstances simply gathered pace. I woke at 4am on 24th June, glanced at the news and felt sick. During the next day the nausea persisted and the tears flowed – I don't try to explain them – it's simply that that's what happened. I sat and prayed overlooking my familiar garden; nothing noticeable had changed at all but somehow everything was different. In an email to my MP later that day I simply stated that I felt heartbroken.

Europe is facing huge challenges. The Euro crisis, steady economic decline, the upsurge of extreme right wing movements and the migration crisis all point to a continent struggling to hold it together. 'Rock solid' banks teeter on the brink and populist newcomers overwhelm traditional powerhouse political parties. Elections and referenda defy every poll as emotion trumps (excuse the pun!) reason and expert opinion, whether it is business leaders, academics or scientists, is ignored and ridiculed. In the middle of this European maelstrom the question lingers: "What should we be doing?"

Before addressing this I first want to emphasize that Europe is not the centre of the world. Despite recent news from Turkey and Nice other headlines from Baghdad, Zimbabwe, South Sudan and Syria remind us that Europeans still live privileged lives. We assume rights such as adequate health care, pension provision, free education, homes over our heads, employment rights and good sanitation. Our compassion and concern should be global rather than just regional. Secondly, these posts are written as a broadly Christian response to current issues in Europe. To some they may therefore appear a bit 'in house' at times but hopefully the points will still be of general interest and value.

Here I outline 6 priorities that I have considered in the last few tumultuous weeks; there could be many more. I have suggested a practical response but each point would benefit from further reflection for action – whether as individuals or groups of friends.

1. Heartwatch

One of the winning slogans of the Brexit referendum was 'taking back control' and yet control is, and always was, a passing illusion; none of us are in control. As familiar worlds implode– whether through personal crisis, the historic closure of mines and steel works or the more recent panic in the markets – fear and anxiety can take root.

The Bible encourages us to watch diligently over the state of our heart – because it is the source of everything we are. Any crisis really just highlights

what is in our hearts as it strips away the illusion of control. In particular we are commanded to live free from bitterness and forgive those who wrong or fail us. Nurturing a strong faith through rooting our lives deeply in the promises of scripture, prayer and a supportive community will disarm fear. Only when we are free from fear and bitterness can we truly judge well and live redemptive lives.

There is so much more that could be said on this but one helpful daily discipline (with a few struggles in recent days!) has been to focus on the truth that give us strength and sets us free rather than a relentless diet of negative and unsettling news items. The Apostle Paul, who himself was chained in prison at the time, exhorted early Christians to rejoice and dwell on all that is true, honourable, just, pure, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. He added that if they practiced what they had learned and seen in him the God of peace would be with them. Good advice for us in our unsettling times.

2. Build Bridges – ‘Who is my neighbour?’

Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren't afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share. A community that refuses to welcome - whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors - is dying spiritually.' Jean Varnier

Change, fear and acts of terror fuel paranoia that, in turn, erects walls and produces extreme reactions. Recent history has shown that this can quickly turn to overt racism, violence and the scapegoating of minorities. Responsible Government decides a nation's migration policy but, fundamentally, openhearted generosity and hospitality are hallmarks of a healthy community. The parable of the Good Samaritan leaves us no get out – we are responsible to care for all.

We must build bridges and show generous hospitality – particularly towards the vulnerable, foreigners and refugees. At this time, when many feel nervous and insecure, bridge building means reassuring our neighbours from other nations and faiths. We can look at practical ways to build friendships, communicate welcome, develop understanding and speak up boldly – whether at the workplace, community or national level – whenever racism or religious hatred rears its head.

3. Prioritise those on the margins

The signs were already there from recent European elections but the Brexit referendum made it abundantly clear that large swathes of our society feel ignored, disempowered and abandoned. This is not a blip and every nation

across Europe has its neglected areas and demoralised communities; people are angry and have had enough.

In the UK it is also not enough for the church just to focus on the success stories of the prosperous suburbs, London and the South East without addressing the imbalance in resources. If the gospel really is the ultimate source of hope then the church simply has to strategically prioritise the marginalised in terms of mission, church planting and justice initiatives.

In the nineteenth century the church led the way, from the grassroots, in bringing hope and justice to the burgeoning cities. We now need to be similarly intentional in both strategising for the next 30 – 50 years and training and sending our best people and resources to be among the neediest areas in Europe.

4. Live as Europeans

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee." John Donne

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the European Union has been to deliver 70 years of peace and cooperation between its members. The founding members of the Common Market had been at the geographical heart of two World Wars, which saw 77 million killed in 30 years. As a specific example I understand that the post war period is the first generation in history when Finnish men have not been involved in armed conflict in their nation. I am convinced that the primary motivation of the EEC was to bring stability, understanding and cooperation to avoid any future war.

In the past, particularly in the age of Empire, Britain often stood aloof and pursued its own interests through a deliberate policy of 'splendid isolation.' In modern times, and within the EU, our reputation has often been as outsiders. With threat and instability there is now a real danger that we will withdraw into another era of isolation rather than engage, serve and consider the interests of other Europeans as equal with our own.

For Christians our primary allegiance is never to a nation but to a kingdom of love, service and sacrifice, regardless of geography. Europe is a maelstrom of spiritual, demographic, economic, ethnic and environmental tensions and without cooperation we are deluded. Regardless of Brexit we need to listen and learn from our European friends and, as with any healthy relationship, be prepared to cooperate and compromise. Finally if mission is, in any way, a priority we must engage with the rest of the continent – we have a crucial role to play.

5. Encourage a positive political climate – and get involved

After the tragic murder of UK MP Jo Cox there were many moving tributes to her as a wife, mother and social activist who entered politics to make a positive difference. One MP commented that, surprising as it may sound, in his 6 years in Westminster he could count on the fingers of one hand (well perhaps two!) those who were not similarly well meaning, hard working and committed. Across Europe many nations are also worryingly divided and the reputation of politicians is rock bottom.

It is far too easy, particularly when fuelled by social media and a polarised press, to create a toxic, negative and divisive culture of criticism. This in turn undermines long term planning as politicians look for short-term approval to stay in power. Tit-for-tat confrontation, character assassination and thoughtless partisanship are lazy and will be destructive. Of course politicians need to be fully accountable and reasonable debate, argument and disagreement are essential as part of good government. However we should also show grace and be quick to pray, forgive, praise and encourage our representatives.

6. Nurture a healthy spiritual scepticism – without cynicism

AW Tozer, an American pastor of a previous generation, asserted, with typical prophetic insight, that ‘gullibility is not synonymous with spirituality’. It is always of paramount importance for the praying church to be listening to the whispers of the Spirit and open to His interruptions. However we must also recognise that we all ‘see and prophesy in part’. As an example in the recent Brexit referendum there were those respected for their prayerfulness and prophetic insight on both sides of the argument.

Throughout history tumultuous times of change have always fuelled an upsurge in bizarre conspiracy theories, prophecies and unorthodox biblical interpretations. In our day the internet adds fuel to the fire and any truth can be swamped by ‘special insights’, fanciful notions, rumours and fables. It is a dangerous thing whenever any group is absolutely convinced that God is on their side of the argument – it will lead to division and, perhaps, worse.

The wisest course is surely to focus on the proven. Together we pursue ‘the faith once delivered’ through Spirit filled community, prayer, orthodox scriptural teaching, works of mission and mercy and the sacraments. These disciplines have unfailingly carried the church through turmoil, persecution and affliction in the past and will surely do so again. In contrast the bizarre is normally just that – an eccentric and abnormal response.

Thanks for reading.