

151 "Bibles please!"

The other day came news of an unusual visit. A group of clergy and lay people led by the Bishop of Southwark (a Church of England diocese), visited the camp known as "the jungle" that has come into being outside the northern French port of Calais.

The jungle is a desperate place. It is filled with several thousand people who have taken perilous journeys from their home countries in the Middle East or Africa, into and across Europe, and finally to Calais. There, they desperately try to get on to trucks, freight trains or ferries in a bid to get into Britain, where, they are convinced, they will be greeted with homes and benefits, jobs and hope.

Many travel over to the jungle from Britain with food, blankets and medicines. But the party from Southwark travelled with Bibles - Bibles which Kurdish Christians within the camp had begged for, Bibles in their own language.

Imagine it! You have left home and family far behind. You have travelled for weeks, for hundreds of miles. You are probably the victim of every crook that is going. You are fortunate to be still alive. You have few possessions left. You are in a dreadful camp. You are within sight of those famous white cliffs, but the reality is "thus far and no further". And you ask for a Bible!

Whatever else we can say about these remarkable people, our fellow Christians, we see that the Lord, even in this dreadful situation, has a sense of humour. For Southwark is one of the most liberal dioceses of them all, a place where, in practice if not in utterance, the Bible was "outgrown" long ago. The sight of the high-ups of Southwark driving a van-load of Bibles over to the Kurds is thus all the more remarkable - and all credit to them for making this happen; perhaps this visit will have given them pause for thought.

Many years ago we heard a missionary speaking of his experiences in Iran after the "Islamic revolution" of 1979. Life became very tough for Christians, with threats, kidnappings, imprisonments and murders all too common-place. John was imprisoned as a Christian missionary, in grim conditions. Over the weeks, one of his guards gradually softened in his attitude towards this gracious Christian man, and asked John if there was anything he could bring into the prison for him. John's reply was simple - "Please, bring me my Bible".

Days passed, until one evening there was the guard, and there was the Bible. There was no light bulb in the cell, and it was now too dark to read. John told us he spent the whole night weeping, just stroking the cover of his Bible and praising the Lord. He then read it right through, using all the daylight hours over thirteen days.

I am sure that like me you probably have a dozen Bibles around and about you at home: how easy we have it! But the Kurdish Christians in the jungle, and that faithful missionary in Iran, starkly remind us just how precious is the Bible, so precious that, no matter how dire our circumstances may be, it is the first thing to be sought, and the last thing to be let go.

We remember that there is no virtue at all in our reading the Bible regularly - merely for its own sake. Such reading is not an end in itself, and must never become so. Rather, Bible-reading is the means to many precious ends, the main God-given route towards our spiritual growth, more effective discipleship and the proper honouring of Almighty God.

For the Bible really is God's Word, "God-authored" through His chosen human writers: truly, "what the Bible says, God says" - not a phrase is superfluous, and every phrase is there for a reason. So when, for example, we read in John 21.11 that there were 153 fish in the net, that detail is not included just for the sake of it: the Lord is prompting us to ask, "Please, Lord, why are You telling us this?", and then to explore.

How, where and when we each read and study our Bibles will vary greatly between us. But the key is to give our time and effort to the Lord in His Word in a day-by-day-by-day habit - with prayerfulness, humility, gratitude and openness.

The Kurds in the jungle asked, "Please, give us Bibles". The missionary in the Iranian prison asked, "Please, give me my Bible". Those heartfelt requests say it all.

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