

## THE DAY TIME STOOD STILL

For a brief and totally unexpected moment, was it thirty seconds or thirty minutes, probably the former but it felt like the latter, either way time was suspended. Had anyone walked in would they have found me there ?

Pilar and I had married not eight weeks earlier in the crowded *Iglesia Evangelica Bautista* in Pasaje Gayola, an insignificant narrow street that ended only yards from Gaudi's world famous *Sagrada Familia* Cathedral in Barcelona, Spain, still unfinished then and now after some 120 years of meticulously detailed construction work that leaves visitors open mouthed in wonder. The *Iglesia Evangelica* was a rather less noticeable.

A three-day, probably best forgotten honeymoon followed in the discomfort of an unfurnished apartment in Salou kindly loaned to us free of charge for the occasion by the then director of Youth of Christ, Eduardo Bracier. Eduardo was in fact really Eddie Brasier from South London but it had taken even this native Briton a few weeks to penetrate the disguise. Upon our return from the local *Costa* and not being able to fit a marriage into the walk-in cupboard where I had lived for the past year, unable to seat four persons at the same time and with a live electric cable hanging loosely in the shower enclosure, we rented an apartment with a shiny wooden floor in the Calle Casa Pujolet in Horta. It was there that one day that the telephone rang perhaps for the first time.

A pastor from Madrid by the splendid name of Máximo Garcia Ruíz who also worked for Iberia, the Spanish national airline, wanted to know if we could organize a gospel campaign for his *Iglesia Evangelica* in Villaverde, a name that conjured up images of green fields and splendid homes. He wanted Andrew Shearman to come from England to be the speaker and I was to put it all together, which is exactly what happened, except to say my hope of free flights on Iberia's DC-9's between Barcelona and Madrid never materialised and instead long hours were passed on the inter-city buses with only a distant video screen to help pass the time. The driver's choice of film on one particular night was more suited to Soho at its worst rather than to travelling humanity, so much so that I breathed, "God, we do not need this." To my amazement, the video instantly broke causing howls of anguish from the squinting people behind me whose erotic delights had come to a sudden end, the screen now as black as the motorway night outside. I smiled.

The grey concrete traffic-filled *barrio* of Villaverde was brightened by the arrival of a large white tent announcing the imminent church campaign. Pilar and I arrived, Andrew flew in to Madrid's Barajas Airport and the meetings started on a high, and then proceeded rapidly downhill at breathtaking speed, not helped by little things such as the worship being led by a professional opera singer who was eager to demonstrate her range and volume, and the piano tuner who arrived many hours late only to monotonously adjust every note on the borrowed grand, during the sermon.

The days which had been filled with promise passed but slowly, as grey as the Madrid streets on a rainy day. We talked. "Now that you are married," asked Andrew somewhat unimpressed by church life in Spain, "what are you going to do with the rest of your life?" The conversation quickly moved on but the question did not. It begged an answer and took root as words sometimes do and for want of a better expression, it *niggled*. The question was there at dawn, it echoed at dusk, soon it's voice occupied every vacant moment and Villaverde was providing us with plenty of those.

It was March 1982 and the 21<sup>st</sup> of the month, I know that because in those days I would read five Psalms a day and one chapter of Proverbs, which on that day led me to Psalm 105 which I intended to read whilst pacing the empty church hall in an attempt to silence that persistent *niggle*.

And then it happened. Whatever 'it' was had never happened before nor has anything similar happened since, but that morning time and space were suspended, suddenly, in a moment unexpected, and unexplained to this day. I would have guessed for thirty minutes, yet perhaps it was only for thirty seconds that I was 'somewhere else,' but in those moments the question was silently answered and so fully explained yet without words so much so that I could and did say, "I know the answer, I know what I am meant to do with the rest of my life."

Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name,  
Make known among the nations what God has done.

This is the first verse of Psalm 105; I did not read the remaining forty-four verses, nor the other four Psalms of the day nor the twenty-first chapter of Proverbs. The eighteen words that I did hear literally made my time and my space stand still as if the Author of the words had invited me into eternity and spoken them to me personally as a gift, and a rock upon which to stand for a lifetime.

Did it really happen? Did I hear a 'call' to a lifetime of being thankful to God, of being prayerful and being occupied with telling nations what God had done and was still doing? There was no-one else there to say yes or no. Yet twenty-eight years later on as I write, the experience is still as compelling, vivid and directive as it was on that grey Madrid morning when two lines written in ancient times and in a faraway land leaped from the page and somehow began to shape life and still do to this very day. I could never have done anything else.

This is not the end of the story however because two years and several shoe repairs later a four-inch thick, second-hand dictionary saved the day and took one of those words to another level altogether. Someone switched the light on, someone needed to.