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WHEN THE DESERT BLOOMS
Sacrifice and Adventure in North Africa

Having encountered God in a special way in Morocco it was not surprising that this part of the world should figure as a major target area for our prayers and expeditions. Over the years I was able to lead a number of French groups into these areas. Memories of hot bustling souks and markets, generous welcomes, calls to prayer from the many Islamic minarets and endless quantities of targine and couscous come flooding back.

One particular group was very interested in the area around Taroudant so a trip was organised. One member, Mathias Helmlinger was a recently converted Reformed church pastor. We had been doing some Summer outreach linked with his church in the beautiful area of southern France called the « Vallon Pont D'Arc ». During this time and challenged by the witness of so many young people Mathias realised that in spite of his being a pastor and in spite of his religious training, he didn't really know the Lord in a personal way. With great humility he repented of his sins and asked the Lord into his life. He was subsequently filled with the Holy Spirit and became so on fire for the Lord that the Reformed church in Vallon didn't know what had hit it. They even raised a petition trying to outlaw raised hands and clapping during the worship ! Mathias is still a Reformed pastor in the town of Chalon sur Saône and has become one of the church's leading experts on Hebrew.

Another member was an ex-prisoner who had been transformed by an encounter with Christ and now made his living selling baby's disposable nappies ! We used his wonderful 4x4 Nissan Patrol to take us in record speed from the south of France to Tangiers. His wild driving brought back memories of another Pentecostal pastor I had introduced to Morocco. René Guitare (who didn't actually play the guitar !). He would drive at breakneck speed around blind corners totally oblivious to the possible mortal danger of oncoming traffic ! He is the only person who I have ever made stop - and then fled from out of his car, as his driving was too dangerous for me. I visited the coastal town of Tiznit with him where we were invited to spend the night with some friendly Moroccan young men in their makeshift tent on the beach. We began to share about the Lord with them when they began to light up some rather outsize looking cigarettes. As René preached his Pentecostal heart out the eyes of our friends glazed over and the tent was filled with a rather more pungent smell than incense ! René got redder and redder as the truth slowly dawned on him and when the local police decided to pay us a surprise visit he saw the potential end to his promising ministry.

« Pentecostal preacher in drugs den ! »

He could already imagine the headlines in the paper ! However no such headline ever appeared as the police were used to the nocturnal anarchy of the area and realised that we were there as naive religious men !

The very next day I found myself in Rabat at the office of the Bishop of Morocco trying to work out some partnership agreement on how we might work together. This time the smell really was incense and instead of a glazed response to the gospel I was confronted with the polite political correctness such an office demands. I didn't feel tremendously satisfied with the trip but the Lord has His own ways and amazingly Pastor René is today leading the French Reformed church in Rabat and doing an excellent work for the Kingdom of God.

So our team arrived in the area of Agadir en route for Taroudant. One afternoon we drove out to a very wild piece of the Atlantic coast for a swim. Without thinking I plunged into the sea, intoxicated by the powerful waves, enthusiastically jumping over them as the current led me deeper and deeper into the heart of the ocean. I looked back and was shocked to see how far out I was and began to worry when I saw how hard it was to swim against the current. I paddled hard for a moment tying to get back but realised that I had made no real progress back and had only held my own against the current. Worry grew to fear and fear to exhaustion as heavy waves crashed menacingly around me. I cried out to God and in the midst of the noise and brine felt an inner strength as fear gave way to faith. With much effort I managed to circumnavigate the current and made some progress back but found myself being washed upon very jagged rocks. I then had no choice but to go with the flow as I was so worn out. The waves spun me over the rocks time and time again but I finally emerged bruised, bleeding and bedraggled onto the awaiting sanctuary of the beach. My friends ran over to gather me up, tend my wounds and care for me. The local Moroccans had told them that most people who ended up washed out to sea like I was ended up drowning ! In fact someone had drowned there only the week before ! I had benefited from a fortunate escape.

All these years later I still bear the physical scars from that time on my legs and when I look at them I think that they are a parable of our lives and trials. We often fight against the current in worry and fear but the important thing is not to give up but to find an inner strength through faith in Christ and push through the challenges. We may often find ourselves bruised and battered but never defeated.

Arriving in Taroudant we were greeted with the many faceted demands of hungry hands, smiling faces and clever merchants. The heavy spirit of an unyielding religion infused the atmosphere of the place with a fatalistic hopelessness. I had felt encouraged to search out any Christian allies by trying to find out if there was a Catholic presence. We were led to a big wooden door wedged in between high imposing walls. After some energetic knocking a warm faced grey haired man opened the door to us. Clear blue eyes that seemed to find their light from some deep inner source of spirituality silently greeted us and gave us the assurance of hospitality and welcome.

We were then led into the most magnificent of gardens. Literally hundreds of fruit trees were growing with their luscious crop of grapefruits, oranges and bananas. Ornamental fountains gushed generously from deeply dug wells and myriads of bright flowers danced in the fragrant breeze. The garden itself seemed to be elevated beyond simple earthly beauty to a vocation of worship to the Lord in this dry and dusty land.

This was the home of Père Christophe Leclerc, a Franciscan monk who had dedicated more than fifty years of his life to the service of the poor in Morocco. A simple chapel surrounded by several out buildings provided rest and refreshment for us. Père Christophe was a man of prayer and he generously shared his life with us while we stayed with him. During the war years in France he had decided to help the Jewish people but found himself arrested and sent off to prison camps in Germany. He was in the same prison as the famous Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was later martyred. Bonhoeffer said that when Christ calls a man he calls him " come and die " and Père Christophe seemed to be such a living sacrifice for the Lord. He would never speak of his sufferings but would simply look beyond to some distant place of communion and emphasise that God is love.

Père Christophe was from a large Breton family and he had another brother who had also taken up the priestly vocation (and also shared in the horrors of Nazi deportation) and was known as a famous writer in France. *"La Sagesse du Pauvre"* by Eloï Leclerc was the story of Francis of Assisi. Two brothers taking the vows of poverty and service in the name of Christ. How amazing it was then to learn that another of the brothers had decided to develop the family shop. The "shop" became "Leclerc" supermarkets which is now one of the biggest chains in France. Something like the equivalent of "Sainsbury's" in England. This Leclerc was one of the most affluent men in France ! What contrasts of destiny.

Père Christophe asked us to sign the visitors book and as I wrote my name I could see that the previous visitor had been a certain Bernadette Chirac, the wife of the present President of France. Père Christophe from his quiet place of prayer in this hidden garden in Taroudant was obviously an influential man.

Over the years we made several visits to this centre looking to partner together in the setting up of a prayer base for North Africa. On one visit with a Swiss group from our home church I was accompanied by Sylviane and our two little boys David and Marc. After a harrowing drive over the dangerous Tiz'n'test pass in the fog we arrived at the tranquillity of the centre. In an unguarded moment David made the most of his time by picking as many slightly less than ripe grapefruits as he could from the trees. We ended up with dozens of them ! It takes maturity to recognise the time of ripeness.

We made lots of friends in Taroudant itself. I remember befriending a man who ran a small souvenir shop in the bazaar. He was from the Saharawi tribe where there are no known Christians. Over the days confidence developed and I was able to give him a bible in Arabic. A few months passed since the next visit when I found he had been put in prison ! I managed to get permission to visit him in the squalor of his overcrowded prison cell. He was a broken man looking to be free from the passions which bound and shamed him. Other prisoners squashed in to hear as I shared a prayer of hope and left him with a seed of faith to go with his bible.

Another young man joined us on our travels and again, over the days became convinced of Christ's claims and gave his life, through a simple prayer, to the Lord. Sadly, I later learned that he had been harshly persecuted for his faith and had even had

to spend time in prison until he renounced his beliefs. For such a young believer the pressure was too much and we were unable to have a renewed contact with him. Another sad end awaited our projects for collaboration with the prayer centre vision. The powers that be preferred to let the centre go to a hotel developer who destroyed most of the garden to make rooms for tourists. Père Christophe retired to Aix en Provence in France where I was able to visit him from time to time. His eyes would sadden when he thought about all that had been given away in Taroudant but an inner light of faith would shine through from within where the lessons learned through loss and suffering gave experience to the verse which says.

> *"..unless an ear of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed . But if it dies, it produces many seeds."*

This lesson was to be re-learned many times over the years as we developed ministry into North Africa. I found myself overseeing a pioneer work into the bustling, overcrowded town of Constantine in Algeria. Looking back I was not experienced enough to build on the sacrificial foundation of intercessory prayer that had been laid over several years in preparation for the launching of a young couple into this challenging area. It was also a very difficult time for the nation with the *"Front Islamique du Salut"* having won the elections only to be banned and thrown out the next day by the military government. This lead to much brutality and insecurity with the nation teetering on the brink of civil war. Constantine was also a stronghold for traditional Islamic and anti-Western attitudes. However it was also a town of many smiling faces, hungry for affection and affirmation. We linked with a Congolese pastor who bravely ran the "Eglise Réformée" in spite of opposition and racism. People would cruelly insult them and empty their rubbish in front of their home. In spite of this I can remember the place being packed full of eager young men as we shared the gospel through music and testimony. I remember climbing up to the cliffs of the town where a Roman monument to the "Winged Victory" overlooks the city. As we looked down we would sing out the Lord's reign, not through the conquering sword of the Emperor Constantine, after whom the place was named, but through the humble brokenness of a weak and vulnerable man on a cross. Our missionary couple were also weak and vulnerable, lambs among wolves, yet filled with a dignified love for their neighbours that transcended the shame of failure, persecution and pain. A trusted contact ended up denouncing us and we found ourselves written up in the newspapers as a dangerous group. Fortunately they put the wrong address and names on the article so little damage resulted. The persecution grew stronger against Western symbols culminating in the brutal assassination of several French Franciscan monks. Love was stretched to breaking point and, under increasing pressure from home churches, the couple were pressured into pulling out, leaving the town, even to this day, with no evangelical witness. I remember being asked the very difficult and pertinent question whether Algeria was a "suitable place" for this particular couple. I could only reply with another question.

> "Was the cross a "suitable place" for Jesus Christ ?"