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DESTINATION FRANCE

"Sur le pont d'Avignon, On y danse, on y danse,
Sur le pont d'Avignon, On y danse tout en rond..."

So goes the well-known French song. And 'Avignon' was indeed the destination of our French summer teams.

The entry into France had begun by Claire Armstrong and another girl who had worked in a Christian bookshop near Valence. They had linked with a faithful American missionary called Pansy Wright who had known and worked with Rowland for several years, particularly Yan Jones from the Bible College of Wales. He had made several teaching visits to France, through the North and South East, and Rowland had been his driver... and prayer warrior. In this way Rowland had been able to pray over France and link with various missionaries like Pansy. In fact they had nearly launched a centre in Chambéry together. The Ardèche region had also been visited for canoeing camps at the Pont d'Arc.

Claire then moved with two others to a town near Avignon called Sorgues to link with a British couple, Maurice and Fiona Harrison, who were pioneering a church in the town. Again, Maurice and Fiona had links with Rowland which went back to his time of prayer in the Birmingham area. Rowland himself had long had a burden to work in France and even began to learn the language. Each time, however, that he was to make a venture into the land, the Lord seemed to call him back. On two occasions this was due to the death of his parents on the eve of both trips. Rowland would always keep a few French francs on him in the hope that he would be ready should the Lord open the door to this land again. One day, however, a young man was speaking about his work in France and Rowland felt the Lord asking him to lay down his own hopes for France by giving over his last francs to the man. Rowland obeyed and the seed was sown into the ground to die.

As I headed towards Avignon, I couldn't help feeling that my own life was somehow carrying the investment of those francs and that in some strange way I was taking up the baton that had been lain down in sacrificial worship all those years back. I felt privileged to be stepping onto the foundation of prayer that had been sown years earlier. Incredibly we had four tyre blowouts on the journey only to break down near Valence. Thankfully we were able to repair the vehicle after yet another overnight stay camping out on a French Autoroute lay-by.

Our base in Sorgues was a Catholic school, where we were also to rendezvous with a group of French and Swiss Christians on their way to Morocco. I enjoyed chatting in French to one particular Swiss lady called Sylviane and as she left for Morocco asking God whether He was calling her to serve Him with Horizons, I wondered if we would meet up again.

Maurice and Fiona were very welcoming and became a real 'Mum' and 'Dad' to the tiny work which was developing. Their church provided the right kind of cover and base for the evangelistic outreach. Maurice was also an excellent teacher, not only of the French language itself, but also of the culture and sociology of France, which was so important to grasp.

As a team we were able to learn a few French choruses and a few mimes and dramas. Avignon in the summer has a big festival with many buskers, theatre groups, weird sects, fortune tellers and all sorts of extroverts doing their thing in the big Palais des Papes square dominated by the immense statue of the Virgin Mary. As a group we were able to take our place amongst them and present the Gospel through music, mime, testimony and word. Lots of people would gather around, many of them outside the traditional sphere of church, hearing the good news of Jesus for the first time.

I had always thought of France as being a Christian country, (which it is historically and culturally), but the reality of allegiance to Christ on the ground is a different matter. It depended on who you asked, but most evangelical pastors felt that less than 0.6% of the country was genuinely Christian. Even Catholic priests considered France a mission field now due to the rising secular spirit and the growth of Islam, Buddhism and occult practices. It is said that there are more fortune tellers and faith healers in France than doctors! (And there are lots of doctors in France!)

As well as singing in the streets of Avignon, we also gave out tracts door to door. The title of the tract was *'Indifference'*, and as I walked long kilometres from house to house braving the high fences, barking dogs, suspicious stares and angry attitudes, I was beginning to learn something of the spiritual climate of France. It was encouraging however getting to know the French folk. Gilbert Sanchez was one of the first to receive Jesus through the outreaches and he introduced us to his family. His mum, Mme Sanchez, became an almost legendary figure and after a visit to her home for a meal you really knew why the French were famous for their cuisine.

"Mange! Mange!"

she would cry in her well-worn 'midi' accent. Coquilles St Jacques and 'flan' were her specialities, and it was almost a mortal sin not to finish the whole bowl she had prepared. I remember one particular day when she had cooked snails. Usually in a French restaurant if you order snails you would get a very hot dish with several round china thimble-like cups each containing a ball of gristly meat soaked in parsley and garlic butter. It is quite edible and unchallenging. However, Mme Sanchez' snails really looked like snails! She would catch them in a cage, leave them to starve for a couple of days and then boil them up, shells and all, in a saucepan of water adding some tomato sauce.

"These are my son's favourite,"

she said, emptying out a dozen very dead looking snails on to my plate, and giving me a long pin to pull them out of their shells.

"You can eat the intestines as well,"

she said, while I contemplated the horns of the first snail on my plate who looked not much different from the ones I had seen that morning on the lawn.

"Come on! Eat up," she continued. "My son ate a hundred last week!"

France is also a very beautiful country. It has everything from sea, lakes, mountains, gorges and green meadows. It is an enormous country full of diversity. General de Gaulle probably summed up France's diversity best when he said,

"How can you govern a country that has over 365 different cheeses!"

French individuality and diversity is at one and the same time its strength and greatest weakness.

Our teams enjoyed making the most of the beaches and rivers in the South and the Ardèche region. I never quite knew whether to laugh, cry or simply shrug my shoulders whenever we, as a group of evangelical Christians suitably clothed in unrevealing swimwear, would arrive on a beach to find we were greatly overdressed compared to the other less evangelical bathers. I well remember one time when a group of more mature single ladies paddled out in a boat. In the middle of the lake they unfortunately lost their paddle and splashed around in circles for a while. Imagine their relief when a burly young man swam up and began to tow them back to the safety of the bank. However as he emerged from the water their relief changed to shocked horror when they suddenly realised he was as nude as Adam!

The evangelistic teams also focused on Eastern France in the beautiful Savoie region where we would work with a Baptist Church in Chambéry. We spent many hours singing, doing drama and sharing the Gospel at the Place des Elephants and many people heard about Jesus in a meaningful way, a handful coming right through to becoming regular members of the church. We would stay in a beautiful chalet in the mountains, which had its own swimming pool and magnificent views. It was owned by a Frenchman of Russian descent called Paul Harbine who was a brilliant musician. He had rejected God in his youth after a friend had died of cancer. One day whilst building his swimming pool a piece of metal broke off the digger and hit him across the throat, severing the veins. Blood spurted out and he was rushed to hospital. While on the operating table he actually died and had a vision of Jesus who sent him back to life, but a new life of service and consecration to Him. He miraculously survived, committed his life fully to God, and built up the centre to be used by Christians. It really was a beautiful location and had a certain feel about it as if it indeed was a special place, set apart for the Lord. It was in the Baptist Church that summer that I preached in public for the very first time.

After the summer, on returning to Llanelli I was convinced that the Lord was confirming his call for me to go to France and I could not wait to get back. Confirmation of the call came when, after months with no regular monthly support, I was promised £60

per month from various supporters. This was the basic minimum I would need to pay my part of a rent in a council flat in Sorgues.

A month later, Peter (who was also working in France along with Claire) and myself hit the road to go back to Sorgues and set up a more full-time ministry of Horizons along with working with the church. Our goal was to find a base for the work as the flat was unsuitable and as the team would inevitably grow we needed a boys and girls house. I was feeling rising excitement at the prospect of launching out on my first missionary journey.

As cash was short we scrambled a lift with folks going to Paris and were then left to find our own way from Paris to Sorgues after spending the night sleeping out in a public park. We awoke early and quickly got to the roadside to thumb a lift down South. However much we smiled or prayed, no one seemed to want to stop! After a few hours we were getting fed up.

"What shall we do?"

asked Peter.

"Why not get a coffee?,"

I replied, reminding him that he would have to pay!

Whilst we were sitting in the café, quietly minding our own business, an older man, who was totally out of his head drunk, came over and made the following offer.

"Bonjour! I'll take you anywhere you want to go in France. There is just one problem, I cannot remember where I have parked my car!"

We then followed him out to the car park where we walked around looking for the missing car. After two fruitless laps of the parking, we were beginning to wonder whether it was all just a joke. Then he shouted out,

"Ah là voilà! - There it is!"

and ran over to a battered old vehicle that had seen better days. I didn't know whether to be glad or not. Feelings of trepidation increased as I watched him trying vainly to put his key in the door lock.

"He can't even see straight to get the key in the lock," I thought.

"How on earth is he going to manage to drive!"

Trepidation became fear as he finally opened the door.

"In you get,"

he said, and before weighing up the wisdom of such action, we responded.

My friend Peter, acting out of a stronger spirit of self-preservation than me, got into the back seat where, belted up, he braced himself behind his rucksack, preparing himself for the eventuality of any sudden impact. I, naively, took my place in the front next to our rather less than sober chauffeur. I comforted myself with the thought that perhaps he would sober up as the journey went on. I thought back to fiery sermons I had listened to about the missionary journeys of St Paul. He'd known shipwrecks, stoning and whipping, but drunken Frenchmen never appeared. So here was I on my own missionary journey. What would happen indeed?

We pulled out from the parking managing to dent and scrape a good number of the more affluent cars that had the unfortunate fate of being parked next to ours. I was encouraged by the more or less straight line that our intrepid driver was able to keep but less encouraged when he wound the window down and began to shout obscenities to the various lady passers-by on the pavement.

"I'm not with him," I thought, reddening by the minute.

"I'm a missionary! I've come to bring the good news."

The journey continued without too much difficulty and as the man began to slur his words less I wondered whether he might even find his senses again. However, before I could get too encouraged, he reached underneath his seat and pulled out another bottle of cheap 'Château Plonk' which he proceeded to open with his teeth (cheap plastic top), before gulping down energetic mouthfuls.

"I wonder if I am doing the right thing?"

I began to ask myself.

His spirits becoming more excitable he leaned over to me and said,

"Would you mind holding the steering wheel for me while I put my sunglasses on?"

Like a twit I complied, leaning over and grabbing the wheel while he continued to drive and delve into his pockets. As he placed the glasses on his nose he said,

"Now, I'm going to see how much of a man you are,"

and he began to accelerate faster and faster.

Can you imagine it! Here I am, young pioneer on his first missionary journey to France, full of vision for the future, and yet sitting vulnerably next to a crazed Frenchman holding the wheel of a car hurtling along at 90 mph! All sorts of things flashed through my mind as he accelerated.

"To live is Christ, to die is gain,"

quoted St Paul, but it didn't inspire me too much at that moment! Somehow though, in spite of the immense foolishness of the whole thing, I felt sure it would be okay. The pervading sense of destiny and purpose seemed to overrule even the madness and dreadful insecurity of the moment. We were coming to a very sharp bend in the road and he was still accelerating.

"Oh no!"

I cried, closing my eyes and jerking the steering wheel round. I was expecting to turn over and spin wildly out of control and into oblivion. However, something strange happened. A miracle happened. Without even a forward jolting movement, defying all the laws of physics, we simply stopped dead. A sense of great peace filled the air and there was our driver in a sleepy, trance-like state. Gently we put him on the back seat and continued to make our way South to Avignon. Many years later I recounted this experience to my friend, Peter and asked him if he really did think it was a miracle.

"Yes, indeed," he replied, "I think we were pioneering a new work in France and that the devil wanted to destroy it by sending the drunk driver. However God intervened and saved us by miraculously stopping the car."

For myself, I'm sure that my own stupidity had at least as big a part to play in the whole affair as the devil's, but without doubt I know that God sent his angel to protect us on that journey. Sometimes, when I get discouraged about my work I think back to the fragile beginnings. Compared to holding the wheel of an out of control car, everything seems like progress!