- 4 -

NEW HORIZONS

Coming from the South of England, Llanelli seemed as foreign a place as I had ever been to. Little did I understand the great spiritual heritage Wales possessed. Not far from Llanelli Evan Roberts had prayed for 100,000 souls to be saved at the turn of the 20th Century. His prayer ushered in the great Welsh Revival of 1904 when the Holy Spirit brought the thousands Roberts had prayed for into the Kingdom of God. Hundreds of stern, square chapels littered the towns and villages of Wales in memory of those heady days of God's presence when each one would have been full to overflowing.

Another Welshman, Rees Howells, had been caught up in the 'fire' of the Revival and found God using him in remarkable ways through his intercessory prayers. This coal miner became a 'prince of prayer', and was mightily used to establish the Bible College of Wales in Swansea, which in turn became a 'House of Prayer for All Nations', helping shape the destiny of many countries and playing a key intercessory role during the Second World War. Norman Grubb's book *'Intercessor'* gives an account of Rees Howell's life and is a challenging, life-changing read for anyone willing to learn more about the power of prayer and obedience to God.

Rowland Evans, another Welshman from near Swansea and founder of the mission called Horizons that I was joining, seemed to have his roots in this same rich soil. Coming out of a difficult background of spiritualism and fraudulent car deals, he found himself serving as a soldier in Malaysia. During this time he contracted cerebral malaria, and lay dying in hospital. In some sovereign expression of grace, the Lord met with him while he was in the hospital.

Over a period of time the Lord revealed himself through a number of channels; a man singing a hymn; a growing sense of God. All of this came to a head while reading a novel by G K Chesterton about a man who was persecuted because of his Christian faith. The last sentences of the book contained the simple cry

"Oh God !"

This phrase seemed to penetrate deep and confirm something of the quiet presence of God in a heart seeking after truth. It was also to become an intercessory 'leitmotiv' for the rest of his life.

After this process of faith, Rowland found himself miraculously healed from his malaria and rejoined his army comrades a changed man. He was no longer attracted to violence and bawdy parties. He found himself physically unable to drink the beer he would have downed with relish a few months earlier!

"What on earth has happened to me?"

Rowland asked a friend on the boat returning to Britain.

"It seems to me you've become a Christian. You've been born again!"

The friend replied, praying for him and giving a kind of formal recognition to a Christian birth which had probably been conceived back in the hidden destinies of the prayers of the Welsh Revival.

Rowland's heart's desire from now on was to be able to serve God as a missionary, preferably back amongst the Muslims of Malaysia. He served for many years in a couple of mission agencies, developing his love and practice of prolonged periods of prayer and Bible study, as well as being strongly involved in inner-city outreach to the poor and destitute. He married Anne and the Lord blessed them with Joy, a little girl much prayed for and who arrived prophetically one morning (read Psalm 30 v 5).

In the early 70's the church in Britain was experiencing a breath of renewal and many new house groups were forming. Rowland became a very popular itinerant Bible teacher for such gatherings. As he was at the height of his ministry and in much demand, the Lord challenged him to consecrate the next years of his life to total prayer and, in doing so, to pull out of public life. A burden of intercession seemed to descend on his heart as dew. The days came and went in prayer. Days became weeks, weeks months and months years. The Lord was leading Rowland to a prolonged period of intercession. After three years of intense prayer followed by two more years the burden seemed to gently lift. Five years of prayer! I remember asking Rowland how he managed to pray for that long. What did he pray? Did he have a long list of subjects? His answer surprised me.

"You know," he said,

"Intercession is like your heart is breaking. It's a sharing in Jesus crying out for the nations of the world. Sometimes a prayer is simply expressing the inner longings of Jesus for a world of people. I can sum up the prayer God gave me in one sentence:

'O God! Give me your work to do!'

Sometimes I could verbalise all of it. Sometimes the burden would be so much I could only cry out, 'Oh God!', and sometimes all I could do was throw myself face down on the mountain heights in God's presence..."

During this time God built into Rowland some of the faith principles which were to be vital in the birthing and discipling of a mission movement. At one time the Lord led him not to receive any gifts other than those whose source was unknown. In order to survive Rowland pawned precious war medals and got down to possessing only his clothes and a suitcase with another change of clothes.

"Well, Lord, there it is. We can't really go much further now. Even if it means dying and starving we will still follow."

The breakthrough came. They survived the testing of faith and the Lord seemed to whisper, as he had whispered similarly to Abraham of old,

"Because you have been faithful in this, you can now reach out at any time into my treasury."

What a promise! It has been this foundation of faith that has since released hundreds of workers and millions of pounds into world mission.

After the five years of prayer, Rowland and Anne were led to Llanelli where Rowland decided to do something for the town by initiating Outward-Bound activities for the local young people who used to hang around with nothing to do. Canoeing on a lake in the aptly named *'Swiss Valley'*, mountain walks and plaggy-bagging (sliding down snow-covered hills on a bin liner for the non-initiated) made up some of the activities. As the young people came the natural continuation of the fun was a small gathering of folk around the Bible.

An anointing from heaven seemed to descend on the region. God had answered the years of intercession and many young people began finding the Lord. Children would pray in the schools and whole classes got converted. Many churches in the region were able to develop youth groups, which seemed to grow and grow. As the locality was being blessed Rowland seemed to hear the Lord speak to him again.

"I want you to take some of these young people to the nations."

At first the idea was simply to give them some basic discipling and vision and then, for those with a genuine call, send them to a mission agency like WEC or Wycliffe. After a trip to France where an American mission leader had strongly challenged Rowland about setting up his own structures for sending missionaries and a chance meeting with another man of similar vision, the scene was set for a tentative start up of a visible identity for the youth group. A communist lent a hall for some of the early meetings and the willing young students who had come for an activity weekend also found themselves sharing the same floor that dogs had obviously used previously in their own show!

One of the first vehicles was a rusty VW van, which Rowland had found in two halves on the scrap heap. After welding it together, it became one of the first expedition vehicles. Apart from the local outward-bound activities, which were still proving popular, a few ventured overseas to France and Italy, twinning outdoor activities with prayer and evangelistic literature distribution. As more sturdy vehicles were acquired the expeditions went further, going through France and Spain into the Islamic strongholds of North Africa.

After such trips and expeditions a few of the young students felt an irresistible tug of the Holy Spirit to come and work alongside Rowland in Llanelli. Early pioneers such as Gail Dixon, Graham Davies, Tim Morris and Gill James (who has since gone to be

with the Lord after a life of intercession) were young misfits when joining but are now key leaders carrying God's anointed ministry to many nations of the world.

I joined with a whole lot of new folk just at the time when Glanmor (the first building) had been purchased. As I approached Glanmor for the first time a small group were just leaving for France in a small VW Beetle. It was the tentative launching of a work in this land. Little did I know it then how much France was to play a leading role in my life in the future.

As soon as I arrived I was given a job. Scraping the stairs. Even after 20 years I'm still scraping and cleaning things. The only change is that I'm scraping the walls of a big white Chateau now! Still, that's a later story. The hours passed. No one seemed to let me know when it was lunchtime, or teatime! After a few more hours of scraping I retired, hungry, to Number 9, the boys' house where I had a room. Actually it was a kind of attic with no heating and a roof window which blew off in high winds exposing me to the elements! If anything it was good training for camping out on the Black Mountains!

We were five single men living in the house and none of us had much idea about how to live normally! As tired faces used to emerge hungrily in the morning, rush downstairs, grab whatever food was available and then run off, I used to think about the early cavemen struggling for survival in a fight of the fittest. The house really did resemble a cross between the black hole of Calcutta and a London doss house. Milk bottles, unwashed and unreturned for months, would line the stairs in a kind of fungus offering to some unknown God! One fellow who came to stay with us said that walking up the stairs was like walking on the moon as all the dust would rise up at each step. Going to the loo was in itself a step of faith. Half of the loo was already poking through the downstairs ceiling and each time you took your place for a comfortable moment of mediation, it was wise to grip the chain tightly in case you found yourself abseiling down the lounge wall with your trousers round your ankles! We tried our best at home improvements. One attempt at putting in hot water left one with singed fingers and me with my slippers on fire!

Looking back I am sure the physical mess reflected the way our inner lives were in the same kind of shambles and the fear and passivity which held us back from making a difference. Happily, though, Number 9 has since been totally renovated, as has the whole of the rundown station area where it was located. I wonder if I can say the same concerning my own spiritual life?

In spite of the material hardship I enjoyed my time immensely. I was young and untouched by religious cynicism, full of hope concerning my future with Jesus and overwhelmed by a sense of privilege of being able to serve Him - even if I didn't know when dinner was being served!

I thrived in the environment of buoyant faith, communal work and spartan conditions. Whole days were given over to praying together for the different nations of the world. We were all very green and unprepared but as we prayed we would find faith

rising which transcended the reality of our youth and inexperience. Often we would open out maps of various centres and pray for them.

One dear friend, Tim Morris, would often stand up in meetings presenting himself as 'The West African Team'. It seemed ridiculous at the time, but through much faith and perseverance, several expeditions (many of which strategically broke down in the middle of the Sahara), and a lot of prayer, he managed to pioneer a new work into the Muslim stronghold of Niger and establish bases all over Western Africa. There is now a very strong indigenous team. I remember him and some other key bodies being inspired to pray over a map of Northern Africa. As we prayed there was in impression that the Lord wanted to lead us into the immeasurably more of faith that we hardly dared dream or hope for. Tentatively at first, a few began to pray for the establishment of prayer/training bases within some of the most resistant countries to the Gospel. Others took up the prayer with more conviction until we were almost praying out prophetically what the Lord had in mind.

"O God! We are asking you to ring the Sahara with prayer bases!"

The prayer would have been stupid and presumptuous had it not been inspired by a kind of outrageous faith which gripped our young hearts. Years later, as I write today, the Lord has led us to just about complete the task as we have gone and pioneered bases in places where folk told us it was impossible. One day I hope that many stories will be written by the pioneers who made such progress possible.

As well as learning about prayer there was also a strong emphasis on learning to hear God. As God speaks mainly through His written word, we were introduced to the concept of biblical meditation. Spending quality time digesting short passages of God's word and allowing it to speak personally to the heart. Morning by morning we would meet together sharing the fruits and encouragements we had gleaned from God's word.

At the same time I had been challenged by a book written by a man called Ralph Shallis (*'From Now On' – 'Si Tu Veux Aller Loin'*) who was a missionary in France. He felt it normal to give back to God at least a tithe of our time in prayer and meditation. That makes approximately two and a half-hours a day. (This, as well as the normal workday and church duties, etc.) He also proposed the reading through of the entire Bible at least once a year. Year after year the systematic overview and grip would build up. These have been principles that I have tried to keep up, (thanks more to God's grace than any particular attribute on my part) and which have formed the bedrock of any ministry the Lord has sought to develop through me.

I was also learning the very practical art of living by faith, or praying in money to live on. Much to the chagrin of friends and family, Horizons paid no wages. Quite the opposite in fact! Each one was responsible for supporting his own needs, (rent and food), plus the costs of his ministry, (travel etc). Apart from the very practical things folk needed to do like getting sent out from the church, putting out an information letter for friends and family etc., the emphasis was placed on the ability to trust God and pray

in finances in the manner of the early faith mission pioneers like George Muller of Bristol and Hudson Taylor who founded the China Inland Mission.

One of my biggest barriers to overcome was independence and pride. Why should I depend on others to meet my needs? To make it worse my mother told me how difficult she found it to explain to friends about what I was involved in.

"Those boys of yours who went to University, what are they doing now?"

Neighbours would ask.

"Well, some kind of missionary work,"

came the sheepish reply.

"Oh, and how much do they earn?"

"Well, actually, nothing. They are supported by friends and churches."

"Oh! I could never do that - it's like begging!"

And there it was. The terrible inner accusation of sponging off others! As I thought about it I found that the condemnation did not come from God but rather from a prevailing world attitude that opposes anything that goes against the grain. As I read the Bible I could see that even Jesus, God Incarnate, in whom were hidden all the treasures of wisdom, humbled himself to receive help from others. He received meals from friends and was even helped financially by the women in his team. (See the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 8 Verse 3.) His dependency was their opportunity. My proud independence and shame was only closing the door of opportunity on others.

At that time I had not even one penny of support from anyone so I was hardly giving much opportunity anyway! The Lord led me to give away what savings I had amassed leaving me with just £50 which was a birthday gift. At a meeting that night I heard of a colleague in France who needed £50 for a language course. The Lord prompted me to meet that need and without thinking or questioning it I gave the money away. The next day I received a telephone call from my mother saying that I had just won £50 on the Premium Bonds! (God works in mysterious ways!)

Another test in the early days was a couple of weeks away working on promotion at the annual Spring Harvest event. We tried to make our stand a bit more animated and aggressive than the average missionary stand. I ended up dressing up as a Frenchman, and armed with an over the top accent, striped jumper and onions would accost passers-by, challenging them to an onion-eating contest. Other mad antics included abseiling up the carpet and setting up an Arab Kasbah. All in the cause of recruiting workers for mission of course!

Whilst I was away I realised that I would be needing about £100 to cover the various expenses of the event. I had nothing, and no expectation or inkling of where any money could come from. On returning home I found two letters in the post from folks who were totally unaware of any such need. Both contained cheques for £50. As I opened the letters I clearly felt God giving me much more than just £100. He was building up my faith and letting me know that I really could trust Him for finances.

I don't know whether the French beret had some kind of osmotic effect on me but as I pranced about as 'Gaston de Cornichon', endeavouring to kiss as many attractive ladies as possible with the traditional French greeting, I felt a growing intuition that perhaps the Lord may be asking me to go to France. To test out the calling I volunteered to help lead the French teams that year down in Sorgues (near Avignon) in the South of France.

A less favourable revelation from the time was the fact that I had picked up an illness.

As I drove home huge spots began appearing all over me. Within two days I was totally covered and deformed by the spots which rapidly became itchy scabs. I had got chicken pox. The temptation was to feel sorry for myself and sink into a pit of discouragement. As I lay in my sleeping bag in the humid attic room I was indeed tempted to give it all up. I opened a letter that a friend had sent me from London. All it was inside was a postcard of a big sunflower and a prophetic word that the person had felt led to send:

"*Take courage, little flower, you will come through.*"

I had never thought of myself in terms of a flower, but as I read the words, tears welled in my eyes, and I felt the warm glow of God's love and encouragement strengthening my heart. After a few weeks the scabs began falling off leaving their scars. The illness had been a testing time but I had come through. It was as if the scabbiness of my old sinful life was being shorn away in brokenness leaving scars, yes, but also revealing the potential of a life filled with the Spirit of Jesus.

I used to be responsible for corresponding with our folks in North Africa and in the early days I learnt to type, although I probably had more Tippex than type on the average letter. I also gave myself to developing a multi-media presentation of mission using drama and slides of various nations. This meant that I was away most weekends with a small team doing promotions in various churches. I used to love being away. Firstly because it gave me the opportunity to stay in someone's warm house, sit on comfortable chairs and eat good food! It was also an opportunity of learning to share publicly in meetings.

On returning from one such trip I went upstairs to my room longing to throw myself on the bed and sleep. Unfortunately the attic window had blown in during my absence leaving a weekend's worth of rain on my bed! At the same moment a friend in the house knocked on the door and came in looking a bit embarrassed.

"I'm sorry to disturb you Rob," he said, "but I've got to pay the rent now. I know that you've kept up your payments but some of the others haven't and we're £20 short. You wouldn't have £20 to give me would you?"

You can probably imagine the kind of self-righteous, angry, frustrated emotions which began rising in me when I heard that. I had in fact just received £20 that weekend so I was also trying on the inside to give a million and one reasons why I shouldn't give it. However, when the initial reaction died down, leaving space for me to hear the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit, I felt he was actually prompting me to lay aside my own needs and problems, lay aside my sense of injustice at paying for what others had not paid - hadn't He paid my unjust debt on the cross? - and hand over the £20. At first it was hard but as I did it I felt an inner freedom and joy. He had conquered once again!

Within the mission Horizons it was usual practice to encourage each person's home church to send them out. I had been grateful to Alfred Sawyer (the vicar) and the congregation at St Paul's and St Luke's in North Finchley for all the encouragement they had given me as I came to the Lord, but I had never thought about the need to be sent out by them. Alfred was open to the idea and a few of us planned to travel to London from Llanelli to present Horizons to the church. As we were driving up the M4, Jonathan Booth, who was one of the senior leaders in the mission, turned to me and asked,

"Is your church evangelical?"

"What's evangelical?"

I replied in total ignorance.

After a worried glance back at me, he carried on driving.

Only a few people turned up for the Service, but it did build a solid link back to the church which has been faithful in prayer and support over the years. I feel such a depth of gratitude to so many ordinary folk who have prayed for us over the years from this Anglican Church. Families like the Harnett's and the Crispin's who in spite of their own challenges in life, always found time to welcome and care for us and promote our ministry.

As I prayed for the service the Lord seemed to share with me a word from 1 Chronicles 29 v 1:

> *"... The one whom God has chosen is young and inexperienced. The task is great because this palatial structure is not for man but for the Lord God."*

Little did I realise then how considerable the work was to be and how much building of temples the future held. All I could see was my youth and inexperience.