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LE CHATEAU BLANC
" Redeeming the Dreams "

Having taken you on a journey to the nations, it's time to come back to France. For the last 15 years I have been part of a small "slow burn" miracle that is being worked out here in the north of France. A miracle conceived in the prophetic destiny of God and yet carried and birthed in the simple prayers and perseverance of ordinary men and women willing to give their all, take risks and abandon themselves to grace and purpose. The physical substance of this miracle is a beautiful 16th century white castle, "Le Château Blanc", but the invisible part is the "substance of faith," which, in creating a secure foundation of intercession, is bringing hope and redemption to France and the nations.

Sacrificial service and selfless giving of time and money have wrought a spiritual credibility into the ministry which is reproducing itself as mission movements of quality men and women are being birthed in French speaking Africa and beyond. Many are beginning to come to know Christ in the village of Thumeries as we cut across the historic boundaries which have often kept Protestants and Catholics apart and we are convinced that the town in time will share more and more in the miracle which is being manifested before them.

Martin Luther King started his own miracle of reconciliation with a dream.

" I have a dream…",

and our own story also starts with a dream.

Fourteen years ago the German wife of a French Baptist pastor had a God given dream of a white castle (Le Château Blanc.) She saw a big wooden fireplace and a traditional Flemish style stepped down roof. At this time they discovered a château at Thumeries which was being put on the market by members of the Béghin family (Béghin-Say is a multinational sugar company in France). Their family has strongly influenced France in many ways. Thumeries was a kind of modern 'feudal' town revolving around their factory where 5000 used to be employed. The sons and daughters of Mr. Béghin married influential bankers and traders. One of the most famous sons is the world renowned film director Louis Malle (he died in 2002) whose films include "Au Revoir les Enfants", (Jewish persecution in the Vichy time of France) and more recently "Fatale" ('Damage' in G.B.).

The Château has a long history going back to at least 1547, which is a date inscribed in one of the stones and backed up by local history. Thumeries may also have its roots from the Celtic word Tumulus (meaning burial mound) although this is unsure. The original builders were Spanish knights, the Hamaide family. Other important owner

was the Baron de Carondelet, a bishop who renounced his faith in the revolution. Both Germans and the allies occupied the Chateau during the war years.

At this time the Baptist church at Roubaix had strong links with another Baptist church in Essen, Germany (this church took over an old 'Krupps' building to use for their church). One lady in this church had a very pronounced prophetic gifting. Without any correspondence with France she also 'saw' a Château that she felt would be for the future work. She stipulated that God had shown her a place with water round it and red gravel on the path. Imagine the conviction they must have had when they gathered at the Château to see red gravel and a moat running round the building. The lady picked up a handful of the red gravel and said:

"This place is for the Lord !"

They planned a joint project together to purchase the Château with a view to running some kind of training school.

However the Béghin family met together to discuss the proposal. At the end of the family meeting old father Béghin made the following vow:

" We are Catholics and will never sell this property to Protestants. Our son Patrick was killed by Germans in Paris at the end of the 2nd world war, and we will never sell to anything which involves Germans!"

Nothing would change their minds so it seemed that all the leading and visions had been a mistake.

Daniel (the pastor from Roubaix) who was leading a charismatic renewal in the Baptist church at the time was tested about the validity of the prophetic revelation through this. They simply prayed, committing the vision back to God.

The house was then sold to a man who had won some money in a lottery. A sad period began for the place. All the water pipes burst one winter while the owner was away. He sold off the 'farm' part of the Château as a separate property, thus reducing access to the Château. There is a small wood belonging to the Château. In a shady deal he planned to convert this wood to building land. Despite a petition from the village he proceeded to cut down all of the large 4-500 year old oak trees. The wood was decimated and never even sold as building land. No upkeep was made on the building.

The physical destruction mirrored a spiritual evil as well. At the time when I first began visiting the Château I was surprised to be greeted by a man-sized Buddha at the entrance. In every single room hideous idols from many different countries of the world had been set up. Cupboards contained Chinese death masks. For 'decorative' purposes there were human skulls and witch-like dolls on the tables. The owner's wife was a very mysterious, sad, dark looking lady. Even in the time we were involved, violent storms lashed the property causing roof damage and several trees to be uprooted. It seemed as if

the destructive forces of evil were intent on thwarting whatever prophetic purposes lay behind the acquiring of this building for the Lord's work.

However, God is a God of redemption and even as ten long years passed the prophetic root was simply getting ready to send another green shoot bursting out of the seemingly dry ground. While leading a meeting at our base in the Ardèche Valley and without the slightest knowledge of the previous "Château" story, the worship rose heavenwards and a prophetic word was given concerning a building in the North of France. A rather scruffy young man blurted out:

"The Lord wants to give you a "Château Blanc" in this region."

We had been praying about expanding our work to the North and had a few links there especially via a close friend and his 'welcome' ministry to Horizons teams passing through. I was due to spend time with him along with Rowland Evans. I remember chatting with Rowland about the prophecy.

"Oh. You need to be careful about prophecies and weigh everything up,"

came his wise counsel, when suddenly the phone rang. To my surprise it was from the very man who had given the prophecy a couple of weeks previously. An excited out of breath voice blurted out the following story.

"You'll never guess what Rob. I was hitch-hiking when a man stopped to pick me up. I got into his car and he immediately began to speak to me about a white Château that he was looking to sell. He leant over to me and, half joking said, " You don't want to buy a Château do you ?" I said "No," but then gave him your name !"

"What an amazing co-incidence"," I thought as I put the phone down.

That same afternoon we had a visit from Daniel Lhermenault (the French Baptist pastor) who proceeded to share with us his story concerning the Château. My prophetic friend had got the number of the man who was selling a Château so I phoned him up to arrange a visit wondering if this could possibly be the same Château that Daniel's wife had dreamt about all those years ago. The building was situated in Thumeries and as we approached the town we could see a stepped down Flemish roof, a moat and red gravel ! Was this the time for the Château to come back into the Lord's purposes?

As we looked round the place there was a feeling of 'rightness' and yet an enormous challenge of renovation and financial outlay. Logically it would not have been sensible to buy the place in view of the work but it seemed that God wanted someone to stand in the gap and take up the baton of His purpose, which had been laid down previously. Daniel shared with us how the Lord had showed him three candlesticks burning in the North of France; one represented England, one France, and one Germany. He felt these three lands should be coming together in reconciliation to bless Europe.

The building was priced at £180,000 with about £20,000 more in taxes. We had no immediate finance available. There was also a major concern about the fire regulations for such a public building and the access route for a fire engine. New bridges would have to be built and the future work would be enormous and sacrificial.

The pressure on me to make a decision about buying the Château became very heavy and I found myself ill with bronchitis. Although folks are often very enthusiastic to give some prophetic message or direction there is often less enthusiasm when it comes down to owning the consequences of such a revelation – particularly when that revelation may involve financial and personal sacrifice ! As I lay in bed I decided to listen to some teaching cassettes. One speaker spoke about how he thought that the Welsh revival should have ushered in a world revival of religion but that the enemy had thwarted that through the First World War. So many of the young, heroic and innocent soldiers were massacred in the "killing fields" of Northern France. Europe was 'buzzing' at the turn of the century as the Holy Spirit visited his people. The Welsh revival released a generation of men and women on fire for God and world evangelisation - 100,000 souls were saved in 6 months ! In 1910 the Edinburgh conference on World Evangelisation was held and hopes were high. Rick Ridings, a prominent intercessor for Europe, writes :

"Many Christian historians feel that Europe was prepared for revival around 1900. Many Christian student movements were experiencing great growth and a vision for world missions and the re-evangelisation of Europe. Just at that time regional tensions in the Balkans, flared into World War 1. Two of the countries with the most young men called into mission - Germany and G.B.- ended up sending these young men into battle against one another."

The dreams of so many young men died on the battlefields of Northern France. As I contemplated these truths I distinctly heard the Holy Spirit whisper these words into my spirit.

"Redeem the Dreams."

I felt God calling me and the team, through prayer and sacrificial lifestyle, to raise up a place of redemptive power where a new generation of men and women could take up the lost dreams and so fulfil their destiny in God's purposes. Men came from the four corners of the world to die. Why shouldn't a new generation be raised up from the ends of the earth to bring resurrection life and promise to the nations.

I remembered Rowland telling me how he used to travel to the North of France with a Welsh evangelist. In his spare moments he would climb up to Vimy Ridge (a key battlefield and now a Canadian memorial to the War dead.) to pray. Overlooking the fields of carnage where unexploded bombs still remain dormant and where farmers regularly discover the bones of long dead soldiers as they till their fields, a prayer would rise inspired from the prophet Ezekiel's cry:

"Can these bones live again?".

We began praying for this new generation to go out into the world from here with the message of life. In Ezekiel 37 the vision ends with the resurrection of a nation and "a vast army" on their feet. I felt that in some mysterious way the buying and renovation of the Château would be significant for the mobilising of such an army. The Lord then whispered the words of the prophet Haggai (Ch2 v9) into my heart.

"In this place I will bring peace."

"If this is all from you Lord", I prayed. "Let me be given this very same verse as I go into the prayer meeting this morning."

I dressed and joined the regular Thursday prayer time.

"Does anyone have a word for me I asked ?"

Immediately a lady read out with faith and authority.

"In this place I will bring peace."

The Château was bought in that moment.

The financial reality was still a very real challenge ! I, in my own disorganised way, must have been the worst qualified person to take on such a project. The harder I pushed to get people and churches to give, the less money seemed to come in ! In the end I abandoned myself to prayer and fasting spending long hours in prayer on the banks of the Rhone river finding inspiration from Rees Howells book "Intercessor" and his testimonies of how he prayed in the money for the Bible College of Wales. I was no Rees Howells but the Lord graciously led us through against impossible odds. Quite extraordinarily a bank was brave enough to loan us £100,000 without guarantees while friends generously gave us interest free loans. I remember emptying my pockets on the last day, giving all I had and doing my maths on the back of an old piece of paper. We had just enough to scrape through plus thirty seven francs ! Our rejoicing over the victory was tempered by the very real sense of a battle only just beginning. We had no furniture, no tools and a virtually none existent electric system.

The initial Horizons team at the Château was made up of English, Belgian and Germans. We started with a large evangelistic campaign involving over 100 folk covering Lille, Roubaix and other areas. In the first year there was a constant stream of visitors pushing resources to their limit. Things seemed to be going well, with us making steps in paying off the loan.

Then things went less well. Blocked sewage pipes meant that wastewater was overflowing into the moat killing off all the fish and making a rotten smell.

Team unity began to suffer and very quickly destructive elements seemed to be finding their way back in through division. Both the physical and spiritual fabric of the place continued to suffer. Much credit must be given to the perseverance of the

leadership of Chris and Norah Morton at this time of testing. The local fire safety officer brought a team round the place to inspect our installations. It was a time when we had groups everywhere, sleeping on floors stairs and corridors. Dangerous electric wires dangled down the walls and ceilings in a hungry quest to find the available sockets that worked. The fire officer was not impressed and immediately closed the building due to the danger it represented through lack of modern fire installations. This meant us being faced with even higher renovation costs, the bank loan to pay and no resources coming in from groups.

The situation seemed impossible. It was at this time that we began to sense the need to pray specifically in and around the house. At one session with folks from Britain we felt we needed to release the house from the curse of 'blood-guilt'. This was related to Nazism and the Hindu gods behind it. We needed specifically to release the house from the hold of the 'dead son' from the Béghin family. We also prayed out the past and were led in various prophetic actions in and around the house.

Following this God brought new folks to help in the building and leadership. One such blessing were the Miller family. James Miller was an engineer and surveyor and the ideal person to help us get the building back on track. I often used to wonder how God could call a successful engineer to move from the security of job and life in Sevenoaks to the risky life of faith the Château offered. I think James also wondered at times ! A measure of answer came in an old book that James received from his Grandma which spoke about the wartime exploits of his Grandfather's regiment in France. In one account it spoke of them walking over a bridge near Henin Beaumont on the way to a village called Thumeries ! The account went on saying how they were lodged in the village Château ! Without James knowing it his Grandfather had stayed in the same Château that he had been called by God to help renovate.

The sense of destiny and the call to redeem something from the tragic loss of the First World War grew through such memorable stories. James helped us build a new bridge over the moat. Here was a man who had a key role in building the Copenhagen Underground, used to an unlimited budget and professional contractors having to "build with the bananas" of the Château team ! I well remember one work team introducing themselves to James. One was over seventy, another had a bad heart and the third one arm ! Another German group who enthusiastically volunteered to climb ladders and go on roofs turned out to have a number of seriously disturbed drug addicts whose grip on reality was often limited.

"As long as they don't think they can fly," we prayed.

We found ourselves more locked up with God in prayer with many being led into intensive periods of fasting. Humanly there was no way out but we felt that through the 'pressure' God was calling us to Himself, wanting to lay a true foundation of faith and dependence upon Him alone. During this time we felt we needed to break the curse over the place and take it into the place of blessing it was destined for.

Many folks felt keenly that we should also be praying into the areas of colonial domination by the lands of Britain, France and Germany. That somehow we should redeem the exploitation of these lands (especially the French speaking lands) from slavery. We are still very much learners but since praying this we have been led in ministry to the Central African Republic, playing our part in raising up an African army for world mission. Several African brothers have visited here. It is stunning to think that the recent tragedy in Rwanda and other African nations, (revival turning into destruction and death) mirrors what happened in the Welsh revival. The powers of destruction being unleashed to kill the potential world army.

However we serve a God of resurrection and life, so death certainly doesn't have the last word, and is only God's stepping-stone into ultimate victory and celebration.

In October '94 the Lord met with us in a very special way. Finance and bills had always been a slightly less than joyful experience for me and I would carry around unpaid bills in my pockets like wounds. We'd pray and eventually battle our way through to answer but we grew weary and worried from the heavy financial burden. It was a season of refreshing in the Church and many were experiencing deep renewal from the move of God which originated in Toronto. One of my colleagues came back from such a meeting in Britain and when I saw him I could see a new peace and lightness on his face.

"What's happened to you ?" I said.

"God met with me in a new way," he replied. "Do you want me to pray for you as well ?"

Up till then I had been quietly cynical about this new move of God and its weird manifestations but I felt I should lay my prejudices aside and give it a go. He gently laid his hands on me and began to pray. Before I knew it I was face down on the floor laughing like some demented chicken ! Snot was running out of my nose and, as I lay sprawled out on the floor in front of my team, I thought.

"I'm losing my dignity in front of everyone."

But God's word broke suddenly in with this reply.

"Oh no. It's not your dignity that you are losing, only your pride !"

The laughter was like some deep healing intercession which went deep into the soul. Just as the sterile Sara was able to birth an Isaac (He laughs) from her dead womb and unbelieving heart, it was as if God, through the waves of laughter, was pouring in fresh faith and fruitfulness. The worry and burden of the finances seemed to lift. I even found myself looking at the water and rates bills that were in my pockets and laughing out loud over them ! Now that really was a miracle ! When was the last time you laughed over your bills !

We went throughout the Château laughing and worshipping in every room. It was like a spiritual Spring cleaning, kicking out the old sadness and welcoming in the new joy. The Lord locked us into a discipline of laughter. For about two weeks we could not pray about finances without hysterical laughter breaking out amongst us. Needless to say the Lord faithfully met our needs but more than that we had fallen in love again with the Giver rather than getting bogged down by the needs and service. For me the time was a deliverance from the bondage to worry and burden over finances and in spite of many new challenges in that area I have been able to see through projects with a new faith and lightness of spirit.

As one of the last payments on the Château we needed to repay an interest free loan of £30,000. I was staying on the Isle of Man at a youth camp when news came through that the planned route of repayment had failed and that we needed the money in the next five days. It was indeed a challenge. I can still remember walking around Ramsey at daybreak and talking to the seals about the issue. Their quiet stares were a real encouragement ! The Lord gently said to me :

> "God is within her she will not fall;
> God will help her at break of day."

God indeed did help in an amazing way which enabled the loan to be paid off within the five day limit. We now own a Château that is fully paid for, fully equipped, fulfilling all the French fire security rules, and growing into its role as a comfortable residential centre for folks to discover prayer and mission and to redeem their dreams.

We had the privilege of playing a significant role in launching a powerful nation-wide prayer push called ***France 2001-2003***. We ran a non stop 40 day prayer vigil 24 hours a day over the Lent period which planted a peg of intercession into the French speaking world which will not be easily removed. Since that time France and our works in French speaking Africa have experienced very positive changes in the spiritual climate and the political arena. During the 2001 prayer push a prophetic word was given by a lady who knew nothing of our past dealings. The Lord put the following on her heart:

> "Many intercessors have prayed for the battlefields of France - rightfully so. The Lord never forgets where blood has been shed. I saw the beautifully kept cemeteries of Northern France. Each white cross had poppies on it but then when I looked again, it seemed that there was an army on the move.
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> It seemed that a new army of young people was on the move, men and women. They were very serious about their task but at the same time, there was a great joy in them. They marched from across the sea into France where they met together and became an army. They marched into the cemeteries and took up the crosses. At first it looked rather shocking but each young person took up a white cross and put it across their own shoulder before marching on right across Europe.
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> I could not see any obvious leader in charge or any order having been given. No words even were being spoken, yet they all knew exactly what they were doing

and why. It seemed as if there was a redemptive value in this act, and that the lives lost in the past were going to be honoured in a way no man could ever do, no matter how well the memory of the past is honoured. These lives were going to be of value in the future in battles not yet fought.

There was a beautiful sense of the Lord redeeming time and apparent waste of lives in the past. There was a joy and a solemnity about the scene which was quite remarkable. I did not see where the young people ended up. There were several destinations in Europe, and I knew they would get there and do more than those who had given their lives in the two great wars this century. The task would be more than completed."

What a marvellous encouragement to see the Lord all these years later taking us back to the original vision of "Redeeming the Dreams". We have seen young people from Africa and Korea training with us and, as I write, a group of fifty plus young people are looking to invade us en route for various destinations in Europe. Church groups armed with prayers and paint brushes continue to give valuable help as well as receive revelation and encouragement for their own missionary vision.

Hundreds have also been reached through different evangelistic enterprises notably *"En Route Ensemble"* which has mobilised the church in the North to street evangelism using barbecues to contact folk. An interconfessional cell group in Thumeries regularly gathers folk to prayer and fellowship as well as providing an "Alpha" course for those interested in the Gospel.

And the dreams continue ! As a young girl one of my African colleagues (Maguy Barthaburu) dreamt prophetically of all that the Lord would do over a number of years in her nation of Central African Republic. This lead her into a life of deep intercession. She married a Basque Frenchman born in Algeria (Jean) and, after a time in Africa, they found themselves in a Bible School in Denmark. During their time there the Lord clearly showed Maguy the "Château Blanc" in a dream and told them that this was to be the next step for their ministry. They then heard about our work by chance as they were passing through, visiting friends in the North. They found their way to the Château and found it to be all that Maguy had seen in her dream – except for one detail. She had seen a decorated Château and we were in the midst of redecoration. We had already chosen our colour scheme and decided to test Maguy's dream by asking her which colours the Château was decorated in. She had 250 options to choose from. Amazingly she chose the right colours! Since then they have become valued members of the Château team and have begun to see the deep redemption of their dreams for Central African Republic.

There are so many unsung heroes in this story and I'm ashamed at not being able to mention them all. Paula, Melissa, Loveday, Anne, Sylviane, Ian and Marie-France, Chris and Helen, Tim and Heather, all represent lives sown in service.

As we go through our different seasons of the vision we can look back over the past and say a big "Ebenezer" – The Lord has indeed been our "Stone of Help" as we've looked after this big stone in the North of France. Jacob anointed his stone which was a

place of communication with heaven, the very house of God. May the Lord keep us flexible and anointed as we pursue our dreams and try to build an environment where others too can find their dream becoming a reality. And ultimately, like the prophet Daniel (Ch 2 v 23) may we too be able to say that we have been an expression of the ultimate Dream, the Dream of the King !

"you have made known to us the dream of the king"