

I spent this last week in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. This beautiful country situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, with the state of Israel to the south and Syria to the east and north, came into being at the end of the First World War with the break up of the Ottoman Empire, initially administered by France before being given independence. The home of the Phoenicians, the cities on the Lebanese coast of Tyre, Sidon and Beirut itself are some of the oldest continually occupied cities in the world dating back into the 2nd and 3rd millennia BC. It is mentioned in the Old Testament and the cedars of Lebanon were used in the construction of the Jerusalem Temple.

The population is mixed, made up of Christians and Muslims. From the foundation of the state there was a determined effort to maintain balance in the social and political life. The President is always a Maronite Christian; The Prime Minister is a Sunni Muslim and the leader of the Parliament is a Shi-ite Muslim. A fixed proportion of the parliamentary seats are reserved for each group. For many years this was a prosperous and peaceful land.

This was shattered in the Civil War of 1975 -1990. During this period the various factions descended into a bloody civil war, kept going by outside forces. Syria occupied a large part of the country during this period, other groups were funded by Israel and Iran. Not only was the physical infrastructure devastated, civil war and the memories of intercommunal atrocities leave deep rooted scars.

But the country began to rebuild. The constitutional balance between the communities was rebuilt. In the centre of Beirut, that had become a no man's land, the Maronite Cathedral was rebuilt and a new mosque built next door, the towers of which are of exactly equal height. Nearby are the ruins of a theatre

destroyed in the conflict. These ruins are being deliberately left as they are as a constant reminder of the cost and brutality of war.

Then in a brief period in 2005 Israel occupied the southern border region and Syria moved back into the North for a period of time. Then of course came the Syrian Civil war that has dominated our television screens for the last seven years. In the course of this 1 million Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon, a country with population of 3 million. For a number of reasons dedicated refugee camps have not been set up and so the refugees have spread to all parts of the country living in informal and very basic settlements.

This is the country I flew into last Monday, as part of a group from Ireland organised by Tearfund. We stayed at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary Guesthouse and were hosted by Merath, the development arm of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development. We were briefed by staff of Merath on their whole philosophy of operation. Early on in the refugee crisis they came to a very important conclusion. They were called to serve before they were called to preach. So in all their programmes be it relief work with refugees, their work of education, their medical work, relief is offered irrespective of creed, nationality. We visited a school operated by a church in the city of Zahle in the Beqaa Valley serving over 300 children. (Elke was there earlier in the summer offering training to teachers) We visited a number of refugee families in the informal settlements. We also had an opportunity to meet with clergy who travelled from Syria to meet with us. We were joined by Archbishop Michael Jackson for this part of the visit. We had met him at the airport on the way out. He was travelling to Beirut for an international Anglican Orthodox meeting; he made time in his programme to join with us in our meeting with Syrian clergy.

As you can appreciate, I have seen so much, heard so much, all I can offer this morning is an initial reflection. I want to tell three stories of my week.

Three of us went to meet a family who had fled from a village just outside Aleppo. The family consisted of a widow, her son and daughter and their families. Prior to the war, they were a prosperous family. They had a large house, an olive grove, 50 cattle. As the fighting got worse, they moved away but tried to stay in Syria. In the end they felt their only option was to leave Syria. The old lady was unable to walk the whole way so for the final stretch across the border they had to pay \$100 to hire a donkey. We met them in their shelter, a large tent with a rug and cushions on the floor. Nothing would do but on our arrival tea was served. The old lady spoke of all they had been through, their home has been destroyed, their cattle killed or stolen; the help being offered by the Church, their hopes of a return to Aleppo which they referred to as a beautiful city. All through the conversation there were expressions of ‘Thank God’ and even laughter. I left that tent amazed at the resilience of people who had lost everything.

On the day we met the Syrian clergy (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal) who had come from Aleppo, Damascus, Homs. I was particularly struck by a Baptist pastor from Aleppo. He began in almost a Psalm like cry to God. Where is God in all of this? Why are people suffering so much? He went on to speak of his Church and the efforts they were making to respond to the needs of Internally Displaced People (refugees who are trying to stay in Syria). The fighting is easing but the economy has collapsed. But they are sharing scarce resources with those in need – again irrespective of the creed or ethnic origin of those suffering.

On our last day, as I stood outside the Cathedral, running my fingers across the bullet marks still in the stones, I got talking to a member of the staff of Merath. She spoke of awful things she had witnessed as a child. Later on in the evening she spoke of a time towards the end of the Syrian occupation, as Syrians were pulling out troops were running amok. She and her two children were part of a group put up against a wall to be shot. In the nick of time a unit of the Lebanese army appeared on the scene. She was left with a deep hurt towards Syrians. When the refugees arrived and her Church began arranging aid, she offered to pray for them but asked not to be involved in any direct contact. In time it was her son, who had stood alongside her waiting to be shot, who encouraged her to begin to engage which she now does. She said it taught her that it is sometimes we who have to be changed.

As I think over each of these stories, there is a common theme of love, unconditional love shown to those in need, to communities who have been parties to tragic and brutal conflict. Of course, not everything is perfect, of course there is hostility shown to Syrians by members of the Lebanese public. But I am still left with a picture of a Church (across many denominations) showing unconditional love, offering a healing presence to those in need, of giving dignity to the vulnerable. I see a working out of the Gospel passage we read this morning. ‘As much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ Having been loved, people are asking, ‘Why are you doing this for us?’ I thought of the words of St Francis, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times and if necessary use words.’

As we think over the problems we have of coping with refugees, let us think instead of how we can show solidarity of those who have experienced dreadful suffering and seen things that none of us should ever have to see.