

Appreciating God's Arithmetic

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”. (Isaiah 55:8 & 9).

Simply put, the way we naturally tend to go about life is generally far removed from God's thinking. As Christians, and as a Church, we are constantly being reminded and educated about this; but it doesn't come to us instinctively or automatically—which can make life alarming. The world tells us one thing and God says another. A good example is found in Judges Ch. 7 where one of God's more unlikely heroes, Gideon, is facing a big challenge with, seemingly, very little preparation and recent precedent. The challenge was the Midianites who had so consistently oppressed and terrorised the Israelites that it had become completely normal. And now it was all about to get worse. With rich language the Bible describes the threat: ‘The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore’. (Judges 7:12). And they hadn't come for a picnic, but for a fight.

In the face of seemingly hopeless odds, the LORD appears to make the situation worse by removing more than 99% of the Israelite defending army leaving Gideon in charge of a laughably small contingent of 300. It might have been less frightening if God hadn't been so meticulous over the numbers but Judges 7 is full of carefully recorded numbers. An enemy so numerous that it could hardly be counted and against all that just 300 men split into three companies of 100, each with a torch and a trumpet (unlikely weapons!). No contest.

And indeed, as it turned out, it was no contest – but the outcome was completely different to the 100% expectation of any impartial observer. This is not a one-off. Judges 7 is a record which we're meant to learn from because God is constantly very keen to replace our logic and arithmetic with his so that we might learn, and relearn, to rely on God in all our challenges (which are many) and boast about him when he gives his victories (which he does). (See Judges 7:2).

As a church we certainly face challenges, some of which we'd prayed for (eg. a 300% increase in the Sunday

Club) and some of which we didn't see coming (eg. a number of people, mainly internationals, really interested in understanding about Jesus and what it means to be a Christian). A working army of 300 to address these challenges would be very welcome but God has given us somewhat less, well, actually, a great deal less, and then taken away some to face other challenges (by leaving the area) and put others on special duty (by becoming parents).

But God's arithmetic encourages us. ... to come again in needy but bold prayers, to do what God has called us to do, to watch for his answers and to give him thanks, knowing that any victories (and victory can appear in various clothes) are surely all his doing and to his glory.

In Him,

Chris Fry (Elder)



**Philip Wells in Sri Lanka:
report inside**

Sri Lanka Visit

At the invitation of Principal Priya Handy of Baldaeus Theological College, Trincomalee Sri Lanka, my son Tim and I visited the island for a three week trip in between 9th and 31st March 2011.

Background

Our church has had contact with brothers and sisters from Sri Lanka since the 1970s when several members of the Hoole family, notably Charles, Jothy, and Paul came to Brighton in connection with their studies. They were greatly helped spiritually and returned to Sri Lanka by various routes to serve the Lord. Jothy and Paul became Pastors of churches in Mannar and Colombo respectively. Charles set up Baldaeus Bible College. Pastor Les Hill visited in the 1980s and I visited in 1993, 2002, 2006, 2009 and 2011.

Travel and subsistence

The outward journey sets off from Gatwick in the morning, and arrives in Colombo at 8.30 the next day. This corresponds to 3.30 in the morning UK time, and we have had just a few hours doze on the plane. We are picked up by van and taken direct to Trincomalee, where we arrive some eight hours later. The air conditioning struggles to get the bedroom temperature down to 28°C. It takes a few days to get our bodies adjusted to the heat, the loss of sleep, and the time difference! Everyone is very kind to us, preparing food that they thought we could manage, boiling and cooling their drinking water for us, and transporting us all over the place, while we just sit and let it all happen around us!

Trincomalee

The Bible College is six miles outside the main town, on the edge of the jungle, by the seashore, at the end of a track. So it is right in the back of beyond.

My first activity was to speak to the church that meets in Pastor Muralee's home. The congregation is thirty or so people, including a considerable number of children. One of the visitors is a Hindu, an ex-LTTE official who suffered an eye injury in the war. He is enquiring and interested.

Photo removed for security

A former LTTE official has expressed interest

Pastor Muralee is currently building an extra floor on top of his house to accommodate a larger congregation as well as occasional seminar groups etc..



A new floor on Pastor Muralee's house

The Bible College had arranged a "Modular Course"; that is a complete course of instruction, wall-to-wall, for two successive weeks. People came from near and far to participate. Some came for one week, some for both. One brother says "if there is free food I'm coming for both weeks". Hmm—I think he is joking. There were forty or so students in attendance.

The subject of the course was "1 and 2 Samuel". I was considerably anxious about my ability to give forty lectures on sermons that I had been preaching over the previous year and a half. But in the event God gave enabling power to remember the necessary detail, and I was enabled to present it with appropriate energy, and to sustain the effort over two weeks. All the students expressed warm appreciation, and we do trust and pray that there will be seed sown that will bear fruit over many years to come. Speaking was by translation and I was privileged to work again with Newton (or Newton-Sir, as he was known by the students). Anbou (Charles and Jaqui Hoole's eldest son) was also on hand as a translator, and he did a fine job too.



Baldaeus students



Jothy, Don Bosco and George at Talimannar

Mannar

Tim and I were driven to Mannar on Saturday morning, starting at 8.30 and arriving at 12.30. Mannar is a peninsular stretching out towards India. The main employment is fishing, and the area is strongly Roman Catholic. We were taken to visit the fishing port of Talimannar, a ferry terminus for visitors to India. Once, before the war, this was a place of bustling trade as hundreds of visitors awaited their passage to go on a shopping trip to India. Now only fishermen and a few military police are to be seen. The moon rose over the Indian Ocean as we went for a dip in the warm waters at twilight!

The meetings at Mannar on Sunday were made up of the local congregation (30-40), the congregation from Mannar mainland (25) and those from the church plant at Keeri (15). Pastor Jothy is based on the peninsular, Pastor Morais and assistant Wasanthan work on the mainland, and Don Bosco leads the church plant. Pastor Selvaraj, who has been working as a part-time lecturer at Baldaeus, is now spending more time in his natural home, Mannar. This means that there are five full-time workers. This is putting a considerable strain on finances and serious thought is being given to asking the workers to supplement their income with part-time work.

Tim was asked at short notice to give a talk to the young people, which he did. It was much appreciated.

Hatton

Hatton is situated in the up-country region of high ground in the central southern area. At up to 2000m in altitude this is a fine area for tea growing. The climate is warm and damp, with hills, valleys and lakes, ideal for westerners, not least the original Welsh and Scottish tea planters. The population is predominantly Tamil. These people were brought in by the British to work on the tea plantations, which they still do. The conditions can be very poor, with rates of pay at £1-2 per day and little opportunity of improvement (e.g. via educa-

tion). Here we met some of the pastors of little congregations that gather in homes. There is an openness to the gospel, but little Christian background, the locals being staunchly, even militantly, Hindu.

On Saturday I gave three addresses to a gathering of church people. Most of them were ladies: the men had gone to Colombo to find work and send back money. I spoke about the prayers of Hannah, herself a lady in the "hill country"! We were based in the home of Pastor Vijakumar which is also used as a church and a mini conference-centre. Pastor Muralee told me that he had struggled to obtain this building and was aware of its draw-backs. When needed for a conference of 20 or more there was no room for them all to sleep.



On Sunday Pastor Muralee drove his car over an obstacle course of gullies, stones and bumps to the home of Pastor Stephen. He has worked hard to build a small but growing congrega-

tion. We witnessed the baptism of three Christian sisters. What a happy and lively group they were! But following that weekend we were told that neighbours had conspired to rip out the pipes supplying water to the house, and had thrown witchcraft materials into the house in order to oppose the gospel work.

Our visit concluded with a day travelling to a tea factory followed by a day of complete rest staying at the Glencairn Hotel in Hatton. Pastor Muralee then kindly took us on to Colombo where we were entertained by Nuisia Alphonsus (our friend George's boss's Polish wife). We had one night sleeping in crisp white sheets before waking at the crack of dawn to set off to Colombo airport.

Thanks

The trip was quite demanding. There was much to do, and many wonderful people to meet. It is thanks to our Saviour that such bonds can exist and be sustained across thousands of miles and decades of time. I would like to thank very much those who so kindly gave financial support so that I could make this trip. I would also like to express my thanks to our generous hosts in Sri Lanka: Priya and Nirmalka; Pastor Vijayakumar and wife Grace; Pastor Muralee; Miss Priya and Mr Christy. They variously gave up their own space for our comfort, fed us so lavishly, transported us safely to and from long and demanding journeys, and welcomed us with such warmth.

Philip Wells

Church Secretary

Anthony Smith announced in the last newsletter that he got engaged on 28th August 2010. His marriage to Eline took place on Saturday 14th May at York Baptist Church. We trust and pray that both will know God's blessing as they start married life together, and that God will bless with work, though Anthony is able to continue his current temporary work with the University of Sussex working from home for the time being. Anthony is now living in York and resigned as a Deacon/ Trustee with effect from our Annual General Members Meeting on 27 April, retaining church membership until he has settled in a Church in York. We already miss his help with the music and in the administration! Most of the routine admin has been taken on under the contract with Christina's company KTM Ltd. The mainly 'trustee' aspects as Church Secretary including minutes/agendas of elders and deacons (trustees) and members meetings will fall back to me.

The Danish family reported in the last issue returned to Denmark and then moved to Tanzania in missionary service. It is good to have another Danish couple (related to the first) with a young baby join us for a while. Rachel and Mark Rayfield were safely delivered of a baby boy, Samuel, in February. So the congregation is getting noticeably younger (unlike me!). It is good to see internationals joining us, a number from China and South Korea, as well as some from closer to the UK. Since Mark and Rachel have become three, the Calvary International Cafe on Saturday evenings is trialling four week sessions with a break. Thanks to those who are assisting with this. Sunday Club has more children and a very wide age range. For the future we are planning another Summer holiday club for children, so please pray for the planning and for God's blessing upon it.

We thank the Lord for provision to enable us to repaint the Viaduct Road frontage windows (it is now over five years since this was done at the beginning of the refurbishment programme) and also have a considerable amount of brickwork repointing and stonework repairs completed, with work to the east side wall and windows while the scaffold was in place. The large damp patch in the south-east corner of the main hall has been replastered and we hope that this area will dry out and that after redecoration the paint will stay on the wall and not flake off!

Ray Wingate

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Jesus: Prophet or God?

Back in February, Philip was invited to take part in a debate at the University of Sussex Islamic Society, to speak from a Christian perspective on who the Bible says Jesus is. Representing the Muslim viewpoint was Adnan Rashid, a senior researcher for the Hittin Institute and no stranger to debating with Christian clergy. This thought-provoking event was attended by students as well as members of the congregation from Calvary, and provided a good opportunity for inter-faith dialogue.

Adnan acknowledged Jesus' status as a prophet and as someone who could perform miracles, but did not accept that Jesus was the Son of God, and part of the Trinity, which, he believed, were not claims made in the Bible but instead were doctrines created independently by the church. Although the topic of the debate established the distinct alternatives of Jesus as either prophet or God, Philip re-framed this by identifying that instead of seeing the person of Jesus as either prophet or God, it is in fact possible to accept Jesus as both prophet and God. Philip presented examples of what Jesus said during his ministry, in addition to what he did to confirm that he was the Son of God. In the discussion which followed the debate, a particularly memorable question was put forward by a Muslim student, who asked very simply why Jesus did not make more direct and explicit claims throughout his ministry that he was the Son of God. Based on the series of events which ultimately resulted in the crucifixion, Jesus is asked "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God", and he responds "Yes, it is as you say" (Matthew 26:63-4), we are able to see that if Jesus had spoken about himself as the Son of God more directly, his ministry would have been considerably shorter and would have not have had sufficient time to spread the good news of salvation to the world.

It certainly does not follow that as believers of Jesus as the Son of God that the concept of the incarnation and the doctrine of the Trinity are easy to comprehend. The improbability of a perfect God humbling himself so much that he would not only take on human form but even more than this would willingly sacrifice himself to undeserving humankind is surely cause for daily thanks and wonder that, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). To receive such an unearned gift makes it a privilege to share the good news with others, both in the context of a debate as well as in our everyday lives.

Charlotte Overton-Hart

Footnote: Another significant issue in the debate was the transmission (or corruption) of the respective holy texts—one which we Christians perhaps ought to know more about. All in all it was a wonderful opportunity to give testimony to Jesus Christ, our God and Saviour: PW.