Lebanon & Jordan 1997

Monday, 3 November 1997

Yesterday, I was the lay reader at our church in Vienna. I read the Old Testament lesson from the book of Ruth. Today, I am in Karak, in the land of Moab—Ruth's hometown.

It was dark when I arrived here in Father Khalil's 15-year-old Peugeot 505, which was still going strong and without a single body creak after 135,000 kilometres. The road from Amman, Jordan's capital, took us by Mount Nebo, down into the Jordan Valley, along by the Dead Sea and up the rugged mountains again to Karak.

Jean Bouchebl, the national director of World Vision Lebanon, who also supervises our work in Jordan and Syria, greeted me with a kiss on three cheeks and the honest hug of an old friend and a long-time colleague. I returned the hugs and kisses gladly. Jean's living Christian faith has always been an inspiration to me. Despite all that Lebanon's furious civil war threw at him, he remained true to a positive and confident faith. With Jean was Father Khalil, a Roman Catholic priest in charge of a school to receive support from World Vision Korea.

"Ours is the only Christian school in the South Jordan area," Father Khalil told me. We have students from every Christian church: Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and many Muslims. You will see the school tomorrow, but there will be no children." He explained that Tuesday had been declared a public holiday since my visit was arranged.

"In honour of your visit," joked Jean, quickly onto my wavelength.

I was not surprised to hear that the real reason for the holiday was elections.

We drove out from the airport and were immediately in the desert. Rocky, barren, undulating desert. Within minutes, we came upon a small town with the road carving a wide slice through the middle of square stone houses, mostly of recent construction. We drove through the town while Father Khalil searched for the shortcut to Mount Nebo. By then, it was four o'clock in the afternoon, and he and Jean were anxious to show me Mount Nebo before the sunset.

The town featured a panoply of electioneering banners and a large contingent of armoured personnel carriers and tanks. "It's a dangerous night tonight," commented Father Khalil ominously.

With practised nonchalance and well-disguised self-interest, I asked, "Dangerous? For you?"

"No," replied the Father. "For the Bedouin. They all want their own man elected. Sometimes, they will use force to exert their will on others."

If I could, I surely would stand on the rock where Moses stood. The words of an old spiritual sprang to mind as we arrived at the mountain. From this point, Moses looked out across the Jordan valley, and Yahweh showed him all the land of Israel. You can read about it in Deuteronomy 34.

At first sight, Mount Nebo seems to be wrongly named. It is not a mountain if you are thinking about the Austrian Alps or the Canadian Rockies. It just happens to be a round hill slightly higher than the surrounding plain across which we had driven from Amman. That, and the fact that the plain stops at this point and drops around a thousand metres into the rift valley of the Jordan River, makes it an ideal lookout. God already knew this, of course.

The approach to the summit brought us to a closed gate, where we parked the car. A large tourist bus and one or two other cars were also parked there. Jean and I followed the priest through a side gate, where a Bedouin man stopped us and insisted that we buy entry tickets.

“I am the priest of this place,” Father Khalil said sternly. “This is my home.”

The man argued, but the Father dismissed him, and we walked on.

“You have to be firm with Bedouin people,” explained Father Khalil. “If you speak kindly to them, they abuse you.”

On the round crest of the mountain lie the ruins of a large monastery. Built in the 3rd century, it was destroyed in the 6th by invading Muslims. Now, some restoration has been completed. Many floor mosaics have been recovered owing to the foresight of the monks who covered them with sand and cement and kept them safe for centuries. Nothing of the buildings above a metre height remains save for a few pillars in a central section now protected under an incongruous corrugated iron roof.

A large bronze monument in the form of a serpent on a T-shaped stick has been raised near the summit's edge. It represents Moses's “serpent raised in the desert”. It stands about five metres high, framing the view across the Jordan Valley to the ancient city of Jericho (believed to be the oldest continuously inhabited city) and a little further beyond Jerusalem. You can read about it in Numbers 21: 8-9.

The scene was shrouded in a grey evening haze thick enough to turn the setting sun into a moon-like silver ball. Even so, it was clear that the view presented to Moses was hardly of a land flowing with milk and honey. Catching my mood, Father Khalil suggested that Moses died of a heart attack. “He took one look at this, and it killed him!” This humorous interpretation of Deuteronomy 34, in which Moses' death is reported immediately following his sight of the Promised Land, at least would explain why he died even though (according to the Scriptures) “his eyes were not weak, nor his strength gone.”

Encouraged by my laughter, Father Khalil continued in the same vein. “You know Moses used to stutter?” he asked.

“Yes. That’s why he got Aaron to speak for him.” I replied.

“Correct. Well, when God asked him which country he wanted, Moses stuttered, ‘Ca-Ca-Can’, and God was a little impatient, so he interrupted ‘, Yes, I know. You can have Canaan.’ Unfortunately, Moses had in mind Canada.”

The drive took us down the side of the Jordan Valley on a steep and twisting route. We passed by three or four Bedouin encampments, with their black tents and herds of sheep and goats, presenting a scene that has remained unchanged for centuries.

“Would you like to stop for a chat?” Jean asked, affirming the reputation of Bedouin hospitality. “I am sure they will be glad to give us tea.” But it was already dark and cold, and we decided to press on.

The rocky, dry, forbidding hills gradually gave way to a plain covered in dead winter grasses and dotted with occasional buildings. Every now and then, we would pass a substantial home with olive groves and grape vines.

“These are the Palestinian homes”, explained Father Khalil. “Everywhere they go, the first thing they do is plant their trees.”

Father Khalil’s family doesn’t plant trees in Palestinian soil anymore—at least not literally. While he ministers to a community in Karak, his family lives in Honduras. In 1967, his parents were evicted from their home in Bethlehem, as Palestinian families continue to experience. After a short time in a refugee camp, they emigrated to Honduras.

“My brothers consider themselves Honduran now. And our family language is Spanish.” One of six or seven languages Father Khalil can speak with relative fluency.

“I cannot go back to our home in Bethlehem. Jews live in it now.”

Somewhere along the way, our conversation turned to peace. The so-called “Peace Process” has resulted in one tangible benefit. Tourists can now cross from Israel to visit the Jordanian sacred sites. Accompanying us on Mount Nebo were a polyglot lot of Americans, Japanese, and Indians.

“Can peace come?” asked Father Khalil at one stage. “You know, the textbooks the government provides us describe the Jews as our enemy. Even I, as a Christian who wants to live a life of Christian charity, find it hard to overcome my education about the Jews. I think the answer lies in educating our children differently. It will take time.”

I hoped time was in better supply than good textbooks.

The Dead Sea glowed silvery under the sliver of a moon as we drove along its East Bank towards Karak, passing by the site of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rock known as Lot’s wife. All these were invisible in the darkness.

Turning east, we began to climb the walls of the Jordan Valley again. The road was four lines wide and smooth bitumen. An ideal place for a competitive car hill-climb, I thought. I could see Vaatenen driving on the ragged edge up Pike’s Peak. Wouldn’t he make mincemeat of this climb?

In Karak, we encountered more election banners, although Jean tried to pass them off as welcome signs. We stopped by the Italian hospital so Jean could pick up an English-language copy of the Bible so that later, he and I could check our Old Testament references for the places we had visited that day. I offered to let him use my computer-based Bible, but he preferred ordinary paper.

Around a couple more corners, we came alongside a ruined castle, built by the Crusaders, and next to it, our hotel with a large yellow neon sign announcing its presence and purpose. A porter took our bags, and we were swept past the reception desk into the manager’s office. Here, we exchanged hugs, handshakes and kisses, and conversation flowed, mostly in Arabic, for twenty minutes or so. Then the manager arrived, and we were shown our rooms. We ate a pleasant salad and a substantial and tasty mixed grill a few minutes later. During the meal, the manager arrived and took a place at the table, and the conversation flowed freely. Then, a local

Parliamentarian arrived with another man, and they joined in as well. “Visiting” seemed to be the name of the game. And a pleasant game it was, too.

Tuesday, 4 November 1997

On Tuesday, I woke and looked out of my window. I have a collection of photos sub-titled “View From My Room.” I added another to it. Perhaps there is a coffee table book in those 100 photo albums. This view was across a landscape of vastness. Mountainous hills on a grand scale, covered in rocks and occasional shrubs. Here and there, a grove of trees. And scattered throughout houses built of the naturally camouflaged local stone. Roads cris-crossed this landscape, and a few vehicles sped along them, small and distant as if viewing them from a low-flying plane.

Jean and I met for breakfast, and he shared his daily devotion with me. A message about developing faithfulness in one’s walk with God reached me amidst the dangerous business of doing good.

We checked out, but no one was there to take our money. Later, I discovered that our accommodation was “on the house,” another example of hospitality and their way of contributing to our work helping the needy children of Karak.

Father Khalil had not yet arrived, so I wandered over to the Karak Castle, a Crusader-built fort dating from the 12th century. At first glance, it seemed merely a few stony outcrops across the top of a large hill, but then I saw some steps leading down. Under the “hill”, the castle had been rediscovered and was being excavated. There were hundreds of rooms and long stone passages to explore. Seven levels had been unearthed, and I wandered along the topmost two, like basement one and basement two, where natural light flooded in through judiciously opened air holes, windows, and stairwells. I could have spent hours exploring and imagining the life of this vast Crusader community, but I knew our friend would be waiting.

Father Khalil arrived in his sturdy auto as I emerged in the sunlight near the hotel. He took us along streets festooned with electioneering banners, photos, and graffiti.

“How do you say graffiti in Italian?” I asked.

“Graffiti,” replied the multi-lingual priest, missing the obscure joke until he caught my smile.

Even the statue of Saladin riding his rearing horse with his sword held high in vanquishing triumph was plastered with election photos and slogans. Everyone was being coopted to some cause or other.

“Not everyone is content with the election process,” admitted Father Khalil. “About 5,000 dead people voted in the last election.” I heard later that several major parties had boycotted the election, but later news reported that the day had progressed without major clashes. Fifteen women had presented themselves for election. Not one was elected.

Apart from meeting and talking with Father Khalil, the purpose of our visit was to visit the project he supervises, which is supported by sponsors in Korea. The Latin Catholic Church and Parish House are joined together in a narrow alley in the middle of Karak. Across the alley, three nuns live in a small convent, and from here, they run a kindergarten and school in two buildings next

door. This small, crowded complex is the weekday home for more than 600 primary school children. They have a tiny playground to accommodate them, so they spill into the alley at play times. We toured the school building, part of it some hundreds of years old and, although elegant, increasingly frail. Recent road sealing had to be done the old-fashioned manual way when the pounding of the steam roller threatened to shake the building to pieces. Inside this building and a new annex are a dozen or so classrooms. None is large, and a few accommodate 35-40 students. There is little room for activity. Yet the school is popular because the Sisters have set and maintained a high scholastic standard, and their witness to a value system of selfless service and compassion infects the whole life of the school. Roughly two-thirds of the student body is not Christian and come by choice.

I discovered that the sponsored children were all from Christian families. At first, I thought this discriminatory based on religion. Something that is clearly against World Vision policy. Yet, it became clear soon enough that poverty was the real reason for this classification. It is the Christian families in this community who are the poorest.

“There is no official discrimination in Jordan, of course,” explained Father Khalil, “but it is very hard for Christian men to find work to support their families. Work is in short supply. Naturally, Christians are not the first to get it.”

We spent an hour or two walking around the facilities and discussing the various plans for improvement and the school's impact on the community—in the past, now and in the future.

“One Muslim man came to me last week and said I had to enrol his child,” said Father Khalil. “I said I had no room. He said, ‘Excuse me, I am not asking you a favour. I am telling you that you must enrol my child.’ I asked him why, and he told me that he was educated in this school 25 years ago, and it was his school.”

Jean urged the Father and Sisters to begin now, right at the beginning, to think of ways to develop self-sufficiency.

“What would happen if World Vision stopped our support?” Jean asked.

The Father shrugged with eloquent resignation. “It would be the end.”

“Then let us plan now for that day. Why do we need to pay the school fees?”

“Because the families cannot afford them. Maybe one dollar this month, two next month, nothing for three more months. It is not enough to run a school.”

“And why cannot they afford to pay more?”

“They have no work.”

“Then let us think about how we can help them create work.” The discussion moved to ideas about sewing classes, small business development and other things for adults and young people as an extension of the school program. This is true development. It moves beyond the handout needed today to address the underlying causes of poverty and find solutions. Of course, there are deeper problems that must be worked on as well.

We drove from Karak and headed for Petra, two hundred kilometres to the South, where Father Khalil wanted us to have an afternoon’s “holiday.” En route, we stopped by a family from his parish to meet some people at their home—a family of five renting three rooms in part of the house on the outskirts of town. The father was a painter, but work was hard to find. His wife was gracious and friendly, and the four children were full of life and energy. We stopped only a brief time and moved on.

“On” drove us out into the desert for two hours. It was a mild sunny day, ideal for desert driving and, if the rain held off, for walking through Petra. The fabled land of Petra, mentioned in the

Bible under a different name, is a city sculptured out of rock. It existed as a community from around 2BC until the 7th century after Christ. Then it disappeared from the sight of most of the world, although perhaps some Bedouin nomads knew about its existence. Until last century when an Austrian explorer stumbled upon it. The empire ruled by Petra had extended far to the north, as far as Damascus in present-day Syria. After Christ, the city became predominantly Christian, and the Bishop of Petra is mentioned in some historical writings.

The desert drive reminded me of the area in Australia between Broken Hill and the North Flinders Ranges. Dry, rocky, sandy, with low hills, vast distant horizons, and a big sky. The road was wide and generally of a high standard, allowing the Peugeot to cruise at an almost legal 110 km/h. A constant breeze around my head kept me cool and blew my hair (what little remains) across my forehead. I thought someone else's window was open but never bothered to check.

I found myself humming an ironic hymn. "There is a Green Hill Far Away, Without A City Wall." It's ironic because Calvary would not have been a green hill except perhaps for a few short weeks in Spring when the desert blooms. Ironic, too, because I was journeying through an unrelenting landscape that almost completely lacked green.

We stopped for a comfort break at a nondescript concrete block building standing alone beside miles of highway. Inside, it was an oasis complete with a fountain, restaurant, restrooms, souvenir shops and lounge chairs for people to sit in and smoke tobacco through hookahs, those hubbly bubbly contraptions like large elaborate glass bottle towers with a snake-like sucking tube attached.

Eventually, we arrived at the fast-growing metropolis beside Petra, feeling hungry for lunch. Sandwiches seemed the order of the day as we were anxious to spend as much time in Petra. There seemed to be plenty of options as the town has exploded since the Peace Process, with more than two million tourists coming here annually, mainly from Israel. However, when we enquired at one place, we discovered they were short-staffed owing to the holiday and not able to put a sandwich together for us. Winding our way down the steep hillsides, we looked out across a series of low, steep, rocky hills below the general level of the surrounding plain. These were the walls of Petra. As we got closer, we spotted a hotel named "Mövenpick." Since this is the name of a restaurant chain in Europe, we thought we might be able to get a quick lunch there. We were right, but only accidentally. This Mövenpick is a brand-new hotel built in the Middle East style and out of huge stone blocks. Under a circular portico, a fountain played beside where guests could drop off their cars. Inside the whisper-quiet sliding doors was a small lobby decorated with dark wood screens and a large copper chandelier. This seemed impressive until we walked into the atrium, which rose four storeys on each side. The guest rooms looked into this public space through windows decorated with ornate wooden screens and balconies. The room was furnished in truly grand style with large leather lounges and sturdy wooden framed chairs inlaid with mother of pearl in delicate patterns. A giant burnished copper chandelier on a huge chain was hanging over all like an ancient Battlestar Galactica. It hung from an ornate wood-panelled ceiling surrounding a skylight that illuminated the whole room with natural light. We gasped at the grandeur and ostentation reminiscent more of a King's castle than a hotel.

To our right was a dining room of breathtaking beauty. Every table and chair were elaborately carved and inlaid with pearl. There were thirty or more tables. The walls appeared to be covered in pressed gold. The room was not open for lunch.

Across the room was the regular cafe. A pleasant and comprehensive buffet had been set up here, and we were all a little dubious about whether it would be in our price range. Surprisingly, they were only about USD 15 each—expensive by local standards but cheap by international standards. So, we enjoyed the surroundings of this grand place and wished, not too seriously, that we were rich dilettantes for longer than it took to eat lunch.

Soon, we were walking again. It was sunny, and I needed a head covering, so a keffiyeh was purchased for me. I was shown how simple it was to fit it. I wore it the rest of the day, feeling distinctly rakish. It also proved the most sensible head covering for the weather, and I appreciated its logic.

A graded road winds down to the edge of the cliffs that provide the natural defences of this ancient rock city. The cliff walls surround the city entirely, making entry virtually impossible except for mountain goats and one small entrance. As we walked along, Father Khalil pointed out the first graves, holes dug into rocks. Some of the rocks were cut into huge cubes four metres a side, a few decorated with fake arches and caps.

“They put some of the graves out here to fool intruders,” explained Father Khalil. “People would think it was just a graveyard, not a city.”

The road we were on obviously formed a natural water course. Well, it seemed obvious to me. Unfortunately, a few years ago, it had not been obvious to others. During one sharp rainstorm, a wall of water came rushing down this wide passage. At the bottom, the opening in the rock that led down further into Petra created a funnel that turned a one-hundred-metre-wide stream into a raging torrent less than five metres across. Thirty-five French tourists walking ahead of the stream were swept away and drowned. One survived by clinging to a fig tree four metres up a cliff wall.

The disaster would never have happened if Petra had been governed by its ancients. Perhaps through bitter experience, they knew the danger, so they dug a water escape channel that enabled most of the water to bypass the entrance. Not understanding the purpose of this channel, Jordanian authorities blocked it. After the disaster, the channel was re-opened, and a new barrage was built across the entranceway to further ensure the problem would never repeat.

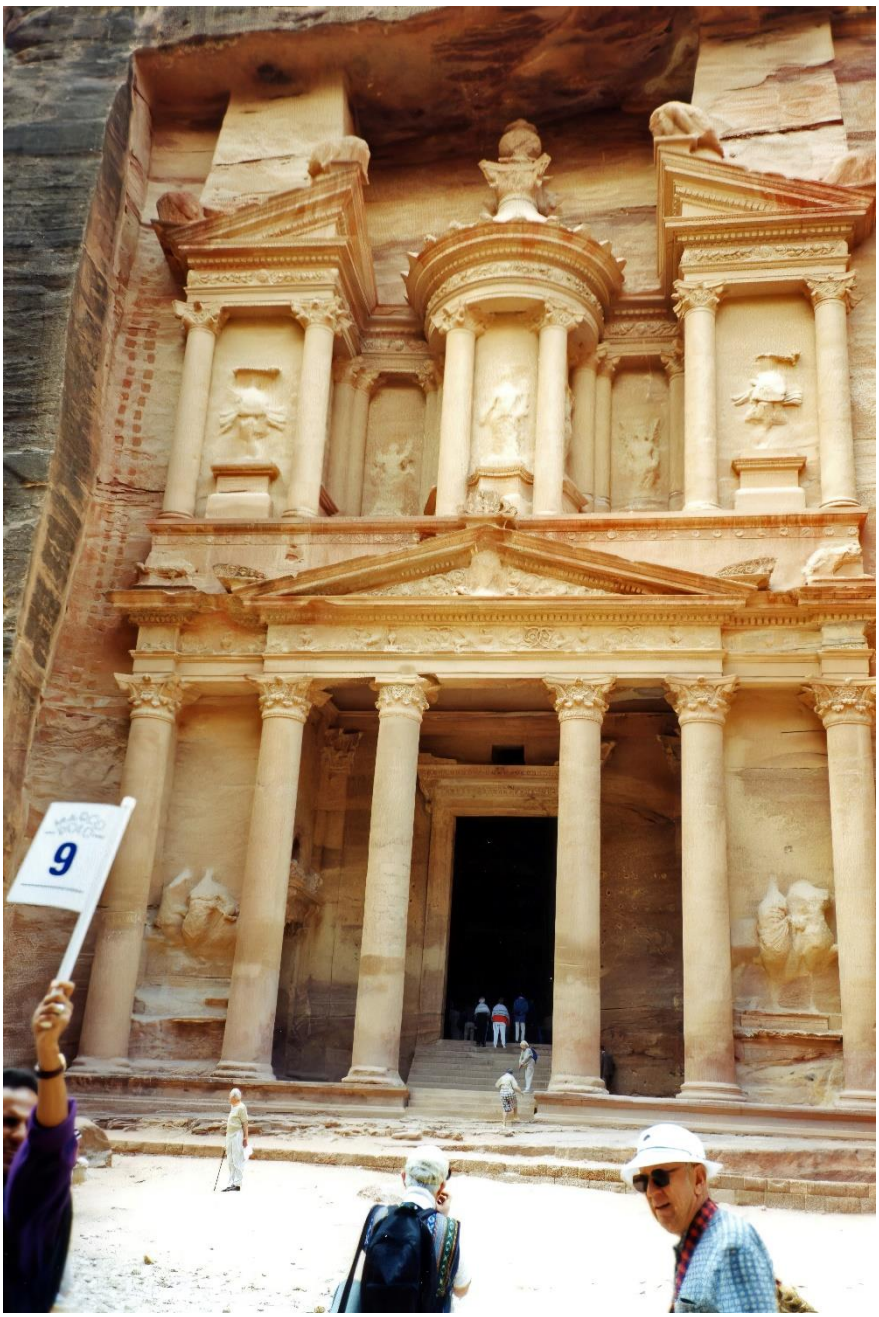
We walked down through this entrance. Some people went by us on donkey-drawn carts that looked less comfortable than walking. To my surprise, the entrance was not the mere crack in the rocks I anticipated but a kilometre-long canyon that wound awesomely down and down, never more than a few metres wide and open to the sky thirty metres or more above. Along each wall of the entrance canyon at hip height were the remains of water channels designed to catch the rainwater off the rock walls like roof gutters and channel it into the city.

Father Khalil pointed out the remains of carvings that represented the pre-Christian Gods of Petra, then a large series of carvings that exploited the natural bulges of the rock face to create a caravan of camels accompanying us on our walk down the hill.

After walking for many minutes, Father Khalil came beside me and said, “One, two …”

I wondered what on earth he was doing when I looked up and, through a vertical crack in the canyon ahead, was a sight that took my breath away.

I was looking at a Greek temple with Corinthian columns and smashed statues. It was carved on the face of the canyon, as high as a four-storey building and in amazingly good condition given its 2000-year age. The height of the door, at around four metres, made the carving look smaller than seen in pictures. We pondered this sight with the hundreds of others who streamed in and around this entrance courtyard. We walked over to the temple and went inside.



Petra is all front. It seemed that none of the carvings had elaborate interiors. This had one large room with three other rooms leading off, which served as graves. Many, according to Father Khalil, merely have one small room behind the tomb's entrance door.

To our left was a long stairway leading up to the top of the canyon and a high place of worship. We went to go that way, but Father Khalil said we would not have time. He had something better to show us in the other direction.

The early view of a narrow canyon with one impressive temple soon unfolded into a valley a kilometre or more across, surrounded by carvings in the rock walls. Each one was a work of art and impressive engineering. We walked for twenty minutes or so and drank in the sights.

Soon, we were in the former main street. Much of the paving remained; elsewhere, it was sand. To our left and right were two vast hills of stones, many of them regular in shape.

“This was where people lived and shopped.” Apparently, the stone carvings we had seen before were ceremonial, mostly for burials. The people of Petra had built stone buildings, but only a couple remain standing today. They were better carvers than builders. Four columns still stand in the main street, recalling a city gate, and one large stone building with an arch about four storeys high stood on the left side of the street. All else was desolation.

A donkey brayed loudly. “Ah, the two o’clock donkey.”

At the bottom of the street, a dry stream meandered through a green area with a few trees, including Australian eucalyptus. A hostel had been built a few years back, and a museum was open twenty metres up the cliff face. An open-air cafe served soft drinks and coffee. We passed it by, carrying our water, and headed for the “convent” that Father Khalil wanted to show us.

We arrived there by way of a long hour’s walk up to the top of the canyon. Now and then, Father Khalil would say, “It’s only about five minutes.” After five minutes, we would look up and see other hikers hundreds of metres further up the trail on ledges that were still a long climb away. “Another five minutes,” he would say encouragingly.

After about an hour of one of the world’s most interesting hikes up the canyon walls, we emerged onto the flat summit and there, carved in the rock, was another temple. This one had served as a convent for nuns who looked across the tops of the mountains to the Tomb of Aaron, visible on a peak a kilometre or two distant.

People younger than me were climbing in and out of this temple, and it was possible to climb onto its sloping roof by scaling the rocks from the rear. One couple perched themselves high above the sandy ground on the edge of the circular central roof and sat meditatively (or frozen in fright; I wasn’t sure) for the entire time we rested before the return.

A donkey brayed. We all looked at our watches. “That’s the three o’clock donkey, but it’s slow.”

The walk back down was easier and faster than the one coming up. The route was dotted with various Bedouin women and children selling soft drinks and souvenirs out of tents. Most had shut up shop by the time we headed back.

A donkey brayed loudly as we walked up the main street on the return journey. We looked at our watches and automatically burst into common laughter. It was exactly four o’clock.

By the time we finally arrived back at the car, we had been walking for four hours, and we were tired. Ahead of us lay a three-hour drive across the desert to Amman. Father Khalil, what a precious companion, shouldered the driving responsibility without complaint, despite a headache, and steadfastly refused Jean’s offers of help. His ability to safely guide the Peugeot seemed undiminished, but I fancy he slept well later.

Later was to be much later because we had a dinner engagement in Amman with Rev Yousef Hashweh of the Christian and Missionary Alliance church. We had a little difficulty finding his home but finally arrived after 9 p.m., with him and his family politely waiting for us before starting dinner. This was a banquet of Jordanian delicacies we enjoyed around the kitchen table with the whole family, save for their 12-year-old son, who seemed delighted to sit in the next room watching TV.

Rev Hashweh talked about the remarkable impact of the church in ministry with Iraqi refugees. Over the past few years, they have helped 50,000 or more Iraqi refugee families. Amman has become a transition point for such people. They come to Amman, former middle-class or even wealthy families who have lost everything in the battle to survive in sanction-constricted Iraq. Here, they wait for the visas to go to another place, most commonly to Australia.

“I wonder why Australia allows them in,” I said, feeling this out of character of a country that seems more determined than ever to base immigration on pragmatic reasons. Sadly.

Jean speculated it might be a mere humanitarian concern, but knowing the kind-hearted Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, I found this hard to believe.

“They have many skills, these people,” said Rev Hashweh, providing the rationale. If you can demonstrate an economic earning capacity, you’re points ahead in any immigration test.

The conversation was free, and the food generous, but we were tired after our long day, so soon we excused ourselves and went to our rooms in the not-too-many-stars Commodore Hotel. Jean argued with the porter about tomorrow’s taxi and finally got the price he wanted by negotiating directly with the taxi driver, thus cutting out the 50% surcharge for the middleman.

Lebanon

Wednesday, 5th November 1997

We woke at five on Wednesday morning to head for the airport and our flight to Beirut. At the terminal we bumped into the Lebanese embassy First Secretary putting his wife on the flight. After greetings, we parted, and Jean commented, “Isn’t it amazing? I was apologising that we had no time to visit him on our brief time in Amman, and here he is at the airport!”

In Beirut, we took Jean’s car and drove to the hotel. The traffic in Beirut was as unbelievably dense as I remembered it from five years before, but little else of the city was recognisable. There had been so much reconstruction that little of the bomb damage remained. Once, there were whole streets full of ruined and collapsed buildings. The majority appeared to have been removed or repaired. I would have believed this was not Beirut if I hadn't known it. Not as I remembered it, anyway.

At Noon, I went to the office and spent the next three hours with the staff, talking and sharing about World Vision, their work, challenges and our vision for ministry. It was a rich time for me, and I hope it was useful for them.

At three, we left and headed to inspect the conference centre Jean had proposed we use for our regional conference next February (‘98). “Seidet el Jabal—The Lady of the Mountain” Conference Centre is run by an order of nuns who live in an attached convent. The facility itself is world class with excellent accommodation and facilities for a conference. It was clear it was a good choice. Jean is reliable in such things, and he uses his former experience as an executive in the hotel industry to good effect.

Our evening meal was with two archbishops of the Syrian Orthodox Church with whom World Vision worked: Archbishop Gregorius Yohanna Ibrahim from Aleppo in Syria and Archbishop Theophilus George Saliba, the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Mount Lebanon. But that was not until 8 p.m., and it was still only 5, although it was beginning to get dark.

Jean had planned to take me to see a castle from Crusader times as one of the places we might take regional conference delegates for a recreation activity. But now, such a visit seemed pointless, with an hour in traffic and no light to see when we arrived.

Suddenly, as we passed by a large university-style building, he said, “Why don’t we visit with Mother Superior, Chidiac, who is coming to our conference in December in Germany. She is right here!” He swung the wheel around, and we drove into an impressive complex of buildings that looked like a cross between a hospital and a school. This it was. The Institution Monseigneur Cortbawi, a university-accredited physiotherapy training and practice centre run by Mother Louise Marie Chidiac.

After we met and enjoyed some coffee together, I discussed the upcoming conference in Germany, my hopes for the program, and the role of participants. Then another sister entered, and Jean greeted her as if she were his mother. For this, she was! Jean grew up as an orphan in Beirut, and he was cared for by the same order of nuns. Many of those young Sisters faithfully followed their vows in this new institution.

They invited us to watch a video with an English soundtrack that described the founder of the institution they now lead and work in. It was a very moving tribute to Father Antoine Cortbawi, who had built a massive and effective institution three decades after the Second World War and then saw it destroyed in the early stages of the civil war.

Undeterred and apparently without disappointment, he set about rebuilding in temporary accommodation. He died of a heart attack in 1979, and the “temporary accommodation” became the institution’s home for almost twenty years. Then, with the peace came the fulfilment of the priest’s legacy faithfully carried out by the order of nuns who had committed themselves to extending his ministry. Today, a new facility stands as a testament to his memory and work on a piece of land now worth millions that the priest had the foresight to purchase when it was virtually a wasteland.

I left the institution with a full heart of gratitude for being introduced through video to one of Lebanon’s modern saints and for meeting a few of those who keep his ministry alive.

It was still early for dinner, but we went to the restaurant the bishops chose and discussed World Vision's affairs. Jean’s vivacious wife, Renee, joined us, adding extra colour and life to our party. Jean asked me to sign his expense report and then presented it to me, written entirely in Arabic. They both laughed loudly at my dilemma. I was ready to sign it in trust for Jean, but he revealed his joke by presenting an English version. We recalled a bad skit he had been involved in at a conference in the Philippines where he played out this joke. In the comedy routine, colleagues quizzed him on his “amazing ability to get his expenses approved without question”, and he revealed his technique of submitting them in Arabic! It was all a joke, of course. Fortunately, in real life, there is no deceit about the man.

Soon enough, the archbishops arrived. Middle Eastern church leaders always look splendid. As usual, the Syrian Orthodox regalia is basic black but decorated with symbols of office and a fine cowl of silvery stars on black material framing their faces. These princes of the church received royal attention from the restaurant staff. Indeed, this reverence for religious leaders is commonplace in the Middle East. And it is fair to say that, in most cases, it is deserved. Certainly, our company this night was typical of many Christians who dedicate their entire lives to living out, in its many manifestations, the living reality of the Christian faith. Archbishop Gregorius had driven down specially from Aleppo to visit with me, and I appreciated his efforts

since the most I had done to deserve it was to drive across one Vienna district to spend time with him in the company of a friend, Rev Dr Ian Allsop from Australia. World Vision is involved in a school in his community in Aleppo, and we both look forward to a time soon when I find my way to his place.

Archbishop George is the first gourmet Archbishop I have met. He organised the meal with generous and knowledgeable zest, issuing careful instructions to affectionate waiters. Someone once said that all a man could ask for is "the love of his wife, the tolerance of his children and the affection of waiters." For this Syrian Orthodox Archbishop, he had the latter. We enjoyed a Lebanese banquet. Flavours of pickles, garlic, masses of tabouli, dollops of hummus, and two kinds of delicious bread evoked the redolence of my youth when I lived beside Lebanese neighbours in Sydney from the age of five to fifteen. Many kinds of meat with complimentary sauces. There were so many plates on a table for five that they piled on one another.

Once upon a time, the Protestant ethic within me would have labelled this excess. Such is the guilt with which so many Protestants grow up. Today, while maintaining some anxiety about waste and excess, I have learned to respect, appreciate and even celebrate the value of generosity that motivates such events. These two Christian brothers wanted to give me something that was within their power to give. It was a pleasure for them to give it, and it was a pleasure to receive it.

Of course, it was not all play. There was lots of talk about the State of the Nation, both religious and secular.

"It is worse in Lebanon now than during the war," said Archbishop George with deliberate tendentiousness. I had heard this from the staff earlier and was to listen to it again the next day from the leader of the Evangelical Church. "During the war, we had no security, but people could earn money here and there, and it was worth something. Now prices are higher. Wages are lower. The currency is so weak. Many jobs are taken by people from outside of Lebanon. And now we have a government, so we have huge taxes."

We also discussed the Government's recent surprise decree to eliminate all import tax exemptions. As a result of this overnight change in regulation, World Vision cancelled three container loads of donated goods intended for the poor. We did not have the money to pay the duty, and no donors could be found in the originating countries.

"OK. They wanted to stop people exploiting the system," said Archbishop George. "We agree with this. But it has hurt a lot of poor people too."

The Archbishop had urged the President to review the regulation. He refused to consider it at all.

I later told Jean that, in my experience, politicians are rarely moved to action by humanitarian concerns unless there is an accompanying community backlash that shows significant support for a change of plan. However, they might respond to political or economic arguments. I argued that such actions do not appear consistent with a government that wants to encourage overseas business interests. The government must demonstrate that the economic jurisdiction can be relied upon; otherwise, Lebanon will become a bad business partner. Sudden changes to regulations that upset people's business plans are death to investment. Lebanon will look foolish in the eyes of the world for this severe and bullying approach to the problem of tax evasion. It needs to react more sophisticatedly and be more worthy of a government that wants to portray Lebanon as a good place to do business.

Around ten o'clock, Jean and Renee drove me back to my hotel not far from the office, and after a short time writing this diary, I retired to sleep.

Thursday, 6 November 1997

The alarm woke me at seven, and I staggered into the bathroom and nearly knocked myself unconscious. The room was a suite in a brand-new and elegant hotel. As usual, Jean had negotiated a room rate at about one-quarter of the normal tourist asking price, and then the management topped it off by telling me I was being upgraded. I appreciated the careful design of the room. One thing that is often in short supply is power outlets. This room had about a dozen, including one on each side of the bed in the headboard. I appreciated this sort of thoughtfulness for the modern computer-carrying executive.

What I appreciated a little less was the design of the bathroom. The roof line sloped in over the bath. Once before, in Brussels, I had been in a room with a tub like this. On that occasion, too, I had stepped into the bath for my shower and cracked my skull on the low roof. I staggered for a moment, and my head cleared as I sat on the bath edge, making a note to add this to my list of things to check for when checking in. I always look for fire exits when I arrive in a hotel. Now, I shall check out the bathroom before I awake, too groggy to pay attention.

I was soon in full charge of my faculties again without apparent ill effects. I set about dealing with the usual daily avalanche of emails which, in Lebanon, but not yet in Jordan, I could receive via my digital mobile phone connected to the laptop. At 8:30, I wondered where my breakfast was and checked whether the staff had picked up my breakfast menu from the door handle. No. Well, that accounts for why it hasn't arrived yet. I rang room service, and they were prompt in remedying the error. The staff were very pleasant, but I was getting the impression that there might be some gaps in training and management. Jean politely took these issues up later with the management. One would think that a good hotel would appreciate this sort of feedback. I've always said that your best customers are the ones who complain. Sometimes, it is difficult to be on the receiving end of complaints, but this kind of feedback always results in ways one can improve the business. This is true in development work as well as in the hotel business.

Jean and I discussed some issues relating to the regional conference, then I checked out, and we drove along the ridge line to the north of Beirut. This is one of the great scenic drives of the world, comparable with the drive up to the Peak in Hong Kong, though considerably longer and more varied. After 15 minutes or so, we were descending again and joining the crowded and mostly stopped coast road.

In "five more minutes", we arrived at the gates of an Evangelical School for Boys and Girls. Here was the office of Rev Dr Salim Sahiouny, the President of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon. We were late, but Dr Sahiouny was gracious, and we were soon enjoying coffee and conversation. I was impressed with the style of the office. While not elaborate it had a definite Presidential feel about it that seemed at first incongruous for an Evangelical church leader who, elsewhere in the world, tend to minimise the trappings of religious office. Then, as we talked, I realised how important it is for this smaller section of the Christian community to fit into the patterns of Lebanese religious life. Dr Sahiouny is an "Archbishop" as far as government protocol is concerned. He deserves to be seen as one.

Again, the conversation turned to the State of the nation, religious and secular. On taxes, Dr Sahiouny noted that while they hit common people a lot, "many big companies and rich people seem to find a way around them." Ah, 'twas ever thus. And not only in Lebanon.

Our meeting was necessarily brief, and soon, we were back in the mountains again, climbing first and then descending among trees and greenery to visit a limestone cave, which Jean had suggested as a second recreational visit for the upcoming conference.

Here, Jean left me to visit alone. A cable car took me up a narrow valley for two minutes and deposited me outside the "Upper Grotto." After depositing my camera in the storage lockers provided to prevent me from violating the no-photos rule, I walked down into the cave through a

long, well-lit tunnel in which piped music and nature sounds prepared me for the visit. I noticed “no-touching” signs alongside the “no-photos” signs, but I did not observe any storage lockers for hands.

Inside the Upper Grotto was a stunningly beautiful limestone cave. I have seen such caves in Australia and France, but this one takes the cake. It is a huge cave in two or three increasingly spectacular sections. A wide concrete path winds through it, first at ground level, then winding higher and higher. The lighting effects are wonderfully executed, and the variety of naturally sculpted formations is breathtaking. From one point, I looked down a deep hole and spied a lake of water below through gaps in the cavern. A few minutes later, I was in a boat in the Lower Cavern after exiting the Upper Grotto and boarding a trolley bus made to look like a small train.

Here again, the careful thought given to the presentation was evident. We started in a small cave with a low roof that arched barely a metre high across the water. Our boat slid silently under this dripping arch, and suddenly, we were in a cathedral of limestone formations and superb lighting. The boat trip would have been less than five minutes, and there appeared to be a further section of the cave to explore, but perhaps the boats couldn’t go that far.

This is undoubtedly a sight worth seeing from anywhere in the world, and we agreed to include it in the conference agenda as a break from the serious stuff.

Time was tight before my afternoon flight back to Vienna, so Jean called Rev Sami Dagher and suggested that we meet at his office and eat sandwiches. Sami readily agreed since a restaurant lunch added two hours to the day in travel time. We arrived at Sami’s office at the same time as our lunch. As I was beginning to get used to, there was much more food than we could eat. And all of it good. I’d mentioned Falafel from Down Under experience, which had also been duly procured. It was delicious, but one Falafel is a whole meal for me. We had lots else besides.

Sami showed me his church and told me the story of its founding and growth. They had to expand the sanctuary every year until they could no longer. So, they started satellite churches. The fourth one would begin in Sidon within a week or two.

Sami echoed earlier comments about the economy's difficult state and his work in Baghdad. “Is there a social price to be paid in Iraq for being a Christian?” I asked.

“You know, it is easier to worship as a Christian in Iraq now than in any other Middle Eastern country,” Sami replied.

“Really? How come?”

“Saddam Hussein is not stupid. He wants to avoid opposition at home, so he contacts minority groups. The Presbyterian Church in Baghdad can hold 800 people. And hundreds come. Saddam Hussein personally donated the organ they use!”

This was an interesting and important answer, but not to the question I had asked, so I rephrased it.

“In Jordan, they told me that while it is hard for any person to get a job given the state of the economy, it is even harder for Christians. Is that so in Iraq?”

“Oh yes,” replied Sami. “Very difficult. And sometimes it is worse. One family I have living in Beirut used to run a shop in Baghdad. Gangs came along and told them they had to give everything in the shop to them. They could do nothing except comply. What could they do? They were a minority as Christian shopkeepers. The authorities would not take too much trouble to help minority groups. They decided it was too hard for them to stay. They came here.”

After lunch and a tour of the church, Jean drove me to the airport for my routine flight home on Austrian Airlines.