

Simon Vibert Langham Croatia Seminars Tuesday 4th – Saturday 8th December 2007

Tuesday

I met Mark Meynell, fellow Langham trainer at Heathrow airport, ahead of our departure at 3pm. Our flight to Croatia was with Lufthansa to Munich (3 hour layover) and then with Croatia Airways on 15-seater to Zagreb. The plane stayed at 10,000 feet and bumped through the clouds!

The roads are fast and good, swiftly taking us 100K NE of Zagreb to the town of Čakovec in the direction of the Slovenia/Croat border. It is cold - -3C - and the fields have a sprinkling of frosting over them. It feels similar, although a bit more affluent, than Serbia.



The Balkans has a complicated history and I can't begin to get to the bottom of it. Most recently the Balkan war has brought about a volatile environment in which to live and Croatia has not yet followed Romania into the EU, although hopes to do so soon. Even during our trip, potential conflict between Serbia and Kosovo is emerging with the latter keen for independence and Serbia, whilst having only a small numerical stake in Kosovo is reluctant to give it up and Albania on the opposite border having a much bigger stake in Kosovo's future.

Whilst quite similar to Serbia there are a couple of main differences. The first is the positive influence of tourism, particularly on the south coast, which gives it that slightly more affluent feel. The other very significant difference is religious. Croatia is dominated by the Catholic Church and Serbia by the Orthodox. East meets west. Whilst there are significant theological differences between the two denominations both Catholic and Orthodox exercise a huge cultural influence on the populace and both tend to view evangelical Protestants as little more than sects.

Our hosts are Toma and Ksenija Magda who are key players in the impressive Baptist church and Pastoral Centre where we are staying.

Wednesday

I slept pretty well despite (or because of) my heavy cold!

The building is impressive! It cost somewhere in the region of \$4 million to build, but bearing in mind it houses a 700-seater auditorium, accommodation for guests and 40 students, that's not bad value for money!

T & K very welcoming. They have a good sense of humour, resonating with Mark and my association with "House" aka Hugh Laurie as our hero!

K has completed a PhD in NT and awaiting her Viva in the New Year (at London Theological Seminary)

Theological education a bit of a challenge. K teaches in the seminary in Zagreb. Students seem to self-select to go there and have a very diverse background. However the school is proving to be a powerful witness to the local community and, in fact, many non-Christian Catholics and Muslims attend the school. They are impressed by the care and atmosphere of the place and there have been some Christian conversions.

There are several challenges for Christian educators and leaders. Many pastors have little theological education and seem to put little time into the preparation of sermons.

I was slightly disconcerted at K description that as a result of the Preaching Seminars run by Langham many pastors preaching was worse by worse, until I realised she meant verse by verse!

In the evening we went out for a meal in an Italian restaurant in the local town (15,000 population) awaiting the arrival of the 60 conference delegates later this afternoon

Mark and I rested a bit of the afternoon then went to meet the delegates. Among them was Robert Maccurrach from Serbia with the new Pastor (Peter) from the Baptist Church in Novi Sad.

I think the first lecture was probably fine – although only 7 out of the 18 present. The teaching may have been a bit dense...? This is partly because it takes a while to get back into teaching in shorter, simpler sentences to ease translation. It is also frustrating that humour and anecdotes are much more tricky via translation. Even when they do work there is a ripple of laughter from those who understand and another ripple when the translation gets through! Toma and Ksenija do a brilliant job of translation.



Thursday

Slept rather badly! The room was light and noisy.

This building is quite intriguing. The facilities are quite impressive, although the tiled floors make it rather noisy though.



I remain a little puzzled as to the “game plan”. Millions of US dollars have been provided to build this impressive plant – with a large dominant church tower and what looks like a solar panel on the top (but isn’t!). However, there are no immediate plans for a church congregation. It feels rather like the cart has come before the horse! Somewhat different to quietly integrating into the community, getting to know people and sharing the Gospel in smaller context before growing a Church. K & T remain the brightest hope for the future of this project and their plans for the future of the building may well be its salvation.

I had 2 lectures this morning: “From text to sermon” which seemed to go OK – 9 delegates in my class today. Then a talk on “The integrity and life of the preacher” to the whole gathering which seemed to ring some bells with them. Paul speaks of the absolute need to watch ourself as well as our flock. Overall delegate numbers are a bit smaller than anticipated with 32 altogether present.

One elderly gentleman came up to me after my first talk and said that he had been preaching for 45 years (presumably with the odd coffee break in-between?!) and hadn't changed his preaching plan. He just prayed and asked God to give him the message. What can you say in response to that?!

After lunch Mark and I walked into the town. The old Zrinski castle is being restored and looked very grand in the winter sunlight. Apparently the Reformation had a strong influence here but was swiftly overtaken by an aggressive counter-reformation which has continued to dominate. The town is quaint but, in the midst of a cold wet winter would be quite dreary I think! We had espresso coffee and cake in a local baker.



They started the evening with a great time of singing which was enjoyable even when you don't understand a word! Although I did detect “seek ye first the kingdom of God” – and there is a deep unity evident which comes from corporate worship of the same God.

Friday

Breakfast is bread rolls (with salt on top), cereal and yoghurt.

Time-keeping is distinctly African! They assume 15 minutes of “grace” at the beginning of each session But even then I don't think the law kicks in!

The morning sessions seemed to go well. It is slightly odd to have almost entirely western missionaries in my seminar group! One hopes that they will be better equipped and enthused to teach others these things.

The food is a challenge and both Mark and I were feeling distinctly rough after lunch. It consisted of a rather nice piece of fresh water fish, soggy chips and beetroot. The main challenge is the amount of fat and then garlic puree poured over the top of the fish!

In the afternoon Toma and Ksenija took us for a drive around the northern part of the region. If we had left an hour earlier we could have gone to Austria! There is some attractive scenery although largely shrouded in fog and rain today. We stopped off at a lovely little coffee shop/restaurant for espresso and cake.



There was lots of cultural humour that emerged in our discussions – particularly to do with Croat relationships with the tiny country of Slovenia. They joked about the fact that you need a passport to play accordion in Slovenia because by the time you have stretched it to full width you have crossed a country boundary!

Some of the hostility towards Slovenia goes back to the fact that the war lasted just 6 days in Slovenia. Apparently after the war (which continued for more like 3 years in Croatia) the bank accounts were emptied of all the deposits made by their neighbouring country!



Although Slovenia is not the only object of their scorn! Prejudice against Serbia is described as hating Serbians more than everyone else hates Serbia!

In the evening I preached Psalm 119 – the same 16 verses they had worked on in their groups. My main emphasis was on how we keep ourselves in the “way” which the psalm affirms as the pathway to the blessed life. We had a fruitful time of discussion afterwards including a wrestling with how much we should stay within the parameters of the text and how much we should preach Christ. What does it mean to assume that Jesus is the lens through which we preach the whole of the Bible and yet not import concepts into the passage from our NT framework.

The most incisive comments come from a keen groups of Bosnians – some of whom who have travelled up to 10 hours to get here. They are already formed into preaching clubs, putting into practice some of the things we teach and encouraging others to join them.

We went for a glass of wine at Toma and Kisenga’s flat and watched some BBC news before bed!

Saturday

They gave us a marvellous gift of an original painting of the cross of Christ by one of their pastors.



I thanked them by saying that English people are known around their world for their cynical sense of humour but that in Toma, Mark and I had met our match, which produced great hilarity and agreement from other delegates.

We were whisked back to Zagreb by Toma (yes, really, I don’t think that one is supposed to drive over 100 miles per hour even here!). Our return flight was uneventful, albeit long (Zagreb to Frankfurt, then 3 hours later to Heathrow) arriving back in London a little before 1am!

This was quite a compact trip, but it seemed to be much appreciated by the delegates and shows a lot of potential for future development into other Balkan countries. Given that delegates seemed to be prepared to travel from several neighbouring countries one hopes that the encouragement of coming together in these marvellous facilities will ripple out into preaching groups and faithful expository ministries across the Balkans bringing clear bible teaching to those of Catholic, Orthodox or no faith.