From St Agnes to Greece

In July 2016, I arrived at Chania airport in Crete with my husband Danny and children, Victoria and George for a summer placement as part of my Anglican ordination training at Ridley Hall. My feelings were mixed, joy and excitement that our unexpected and long awaited adventure had finally commenced, but also some apprehension as I knew this was no ordinary Anglican context. Indeed, looking back I could not have imagined the impact that this international placement would have on my personal faith and vocation in the years that have followed. It became a key part of my story and contributed to the shape of my faith and future ministry as well as prompting ongoing and enduring, mutually supportive relationships.

As a family, we were warmly welcomed by the community of St Thomas Kefalas, an Anglican church planted in 2003 by a pioneering ex-pat Christian, and my host church for the just over three weeks that I spent in Crete. Immediately we felt at home. Worshipping with the St Thomas’ congregation in their beautiful and unique open-sided church building was a joy. It was difficult not to feel closer to God listening to the sound of the cicadas, sheep and mountain goats and gazing at his majesty in the dramatic Cretan mountains, sensing the presence of his Spirit in the cooling breeze. Over the weeks that setting became for me a powerful metaphor for what God’s church should be, at one with, open to and existing in harmony with its community and surroundings.

After a wonderful few weeks with St Thomas Kefalas, I set-off for Athens alone, for the final part of my summer placement. My host for my 5-day stay was Revd Christine Saccali, recently ordained deacon at St Paul's Anglican Church. Soon after arrival I realised there was to be no gentle acclimatisation to Athens life. Within hours we were visiting Ritsona Refugee Camp, about 40 miles outside of central Athens and home to about 700 of the 60,000 refugees living in mainland Greece and the islands at the time, in numerous camps and other temporary accommodation. It was a deeply formative experience I would never forget. In 2016, the camp was a mass of tightly packed tents, many little more than canvas sheets held together by sticks, desperately hot in summer and offering no protection from rain and cold at other times of year. It was amazing to see the work that the charity Lighthouse Relief was doing then and continues do at the camp, supported financially by St Paul’s, to improve the quality of life for the refugees, however we were all overwhelmed by the despondency on the faces of those we saw that day. These were people waiting for asylum claims to be processed, without any idea how long this would take or whether they would ever find a new and safe homeland. Some are still waiting ……

The remainder of my stay involved accompanying Chris in her day to day ministry on the streets of Athens. Whereas in some capital cities poverty is hidden, in Athens it was unavoidable. One afternoon we joined ‘Church in the Street’ an ecumenical project serving food twice daily, and we must have served about 350 to 400 people, mainly locals struggling as a result of the severe financial crisis affecting the country. Another time we went to Victoria Square, at one time the first destination for thousands of refugees on arrival in Greece, by then much quieter but still home to many illegal ‘travel agents’, money-lenders and people-traffickers on the lookout for the vulnerable.

During the years since the placement, I have retained contact with both church communities, in particular visiting St Thomas Kefalas again several times and benefitting from their prayers for my ongoing journey of vocation. Revd Chris Saccali and I have continued to support each other with prayer at key moments in our ministries. Due to the transient nature of curacy, these links to date have remained largely between myself and members of the two church communities, however I know that as I move into first incumbency I can build on these relationships and broaden them to include the wider church communities in which I serve.

For now, both the church of St Thomas Kefalas in Crete and St Paul’s in Athens are very appreciative of the prayers of fellow Christians in Truro Diocese and each church has provided a recent update to guide our prayers for aspects of their ministry, particularly the vital support work to refugees during these difficult times:

Revd Canon Bruce Bryant Scott (Assistant Chaplain at St Thomas Kefalas) writes: *“Just before we went into lockdown at the end of March we developed and approved our Vision Statement and Mission Plan. Our vision, quite simply, is "to radiate God’s love in Jesus Christ, on this island, and beyond." Of course, we have been stopped in our tracks by the lockdown, so the plan is being implemented more slowly than hoped. We have been obliged to worship on Zoom during lockdowns, and even when we meet in person we are limited to 9 or 18 persons in the Tabernacle (depending on which rules are in place). Interestingly, on Zoom we are getting attendees from the UK (England and Scotland) as well as people on Crete who cannot drive to in-person services. We will be starting an online Bible study in January, which, as we emerge out of the pandemic, will grow to include in-person home groups.*”

Rev’d Julia Bradshaw (Curate at St Thomas Kefalas) writes about her work with Anamnisi, a charity in Chania supporting refugees and migrants:

*“Anamnisi has a coffee shop, open on Thursdays, which is available for men only. Before Covid-19 they would play games, charge their phones or generally chat. It is a place of safety and a place where they can ask for help. The majority come from North African countries.* *They are not in camps or hostels, they have moved on from that stage. Some have managed to work through the summer seasons, and sometimes winter, but it is not steady and there are no jobs for Greek people either. How they get here is anyone’s guess.  Some come over from north Africa, others walk from Turkey to the Greek border and continue walking to Thessaloniki where they can get transport to Crete. Most of these men are single or their families are in their home countries. Now they are not allowed to sit in the coffee shop. They can only go in one at a time to collect their coffee and they have to drink it outside.*

*Before Covid I would sit in the coffee shop and talk to the men there. Now it is not so easy to talk as we are all standing outside. Working there is a challenge mentally, mainly because of all the different languages and the different cultures. With all that most of them have been through it seems their faith has kept them going along with fighting for a better life and overcoming enormous difficulties. Learning about other’s lives and their difficulties has made me think about my life and needs”.*

Chris Saccali (Rev’d Deacon at St Paul’s Athens) wrote in Dec 2020 about her ongoing work with the refugees in Greece:

*“A great part of my work is linking up with people and linking people up. Volunteers and projects, donations, donors and distribution. NGOs have come and gone. Many volunteers left never to come back due to restrictions. We still have choice but for refugees stuck here and in lockdown there is no choice. Yet their resilience is remarkable as the years and seasons roll by and as the pandemic arrived. I suspect they had already built up resilience back in their homelands. Europe is not the promised land and the future is uncertain yet the ability of groups of displaced in a strange land to turn into community never ceases to amaze me and the hospitality and shared stories never fail to humble me.*

*Many refugees, of course, are not eligible for relocation and reunification and they will remain in Greece a country which has suffered ten years of economic deprivation. Unemployment is rife and that was before COVID came on the scene. There is much resentment among the indigenous population yet there is work to be had in the agricultural sector, for example. There is a need for Greek language teaching and a knowledge of local customs and tradition for there to be integration and understanding on both sides. The first mosque has finally been opened recently in Athens –this is a sign of hope and promise of inter faith dialogue.*

*Chris’s prayer points:*

* *that those who can legally move on do so relatively quickly, especially minors, and that the decrease in flows continues;*
* *that humane conditions exist,*
* *that disorder is at a minimum and all governments play their part and shoulder the burden, not just the southern countries of Europe who are the first accessible point purely because of their geographical location.*
* *that I have strength to continue while there is still a need and call and that volunteers and NGOs continue to be able to provide services to augment the state’s meagre provision.*
* *that in COVID times the refugees will not be forgotten, side-lined or blamed as, if there is one thing that has become obvious in the pandemic, it is that we all depend on each other for our health, safety and well-being.*
* *that we may we learn lessons from these five years of working alongside others and from the bonds and relationships that have been forged that continue to this day.*

We should never underestimate how linking with international members of our Christian family can lift our eyes from our own surroundings and profoundly impact our personal and collective journeys of faith providing much needed mutual encouragement, particularly during difficult times.

Rachel Monie

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