



## ITALY – Bible and bottles

My fourth visit to Italy in twelve months was my second opportunity to serve Sola Grazia Church in Porto Mantovano. Warmly led by Andrea Artioli, who also co-founded *Coram Deo* ('before the face of God'), a Trust committed to church planting and the production of sound Christian literature, the church has seen some encouragement in the past year, with several conversions and baptisms.

My visit had been timed for the final days of Mantova's famous literary festival, which attracts thousands of visitors. Alan Johnston, a pastor from Coleraine, N. Ireland, led a team that worked for nearly a week before I arrived. Permission had been given to set up a table at the festival — on the very site once occupied by a building in which, following the Protestant Reformation in Europe, many Christians were sentenced to death by an Inquisition. During the week the team handed out 2,500 bottles of water bearing a label advertising events in Sola Grazia Church. More importantly, they offered free copies of well-produced Bibles, of which well over 500 were taken.

The church meets in a hall currently owned by a Communist, who has granted it a five-year lease with an option to renew it for a further five years. During my visit I brought a devotional message to the team, preached at the church and at a meeting held in the *Sala Civica*, the local Council Chamber which included a Question and Answer session, when we dealt with several important issues.



*Coram Deo* would love to rent premises in the centre of Mantova and to use it as a coffee shop and a Christian bookshop. Greater Mantova has a population of 250,000, yet the nearest Christian bookshop is a very small one some forty miles away. This means that there is great potential in the heart of the town for spreading gospel literature and for personal contact with unconverted people, most of whom are nominally Roman Catholic. Three suitable premises have already been viewed, but at the moment any progress is completely blocked by a lack of the necessary funds. Readers who would like to know more in order to share in the project are invited to contact Alan Johnston on 07545 972344 or at [alan.johnston@virgin.net](mailto:alan.johnston@virgin.net).

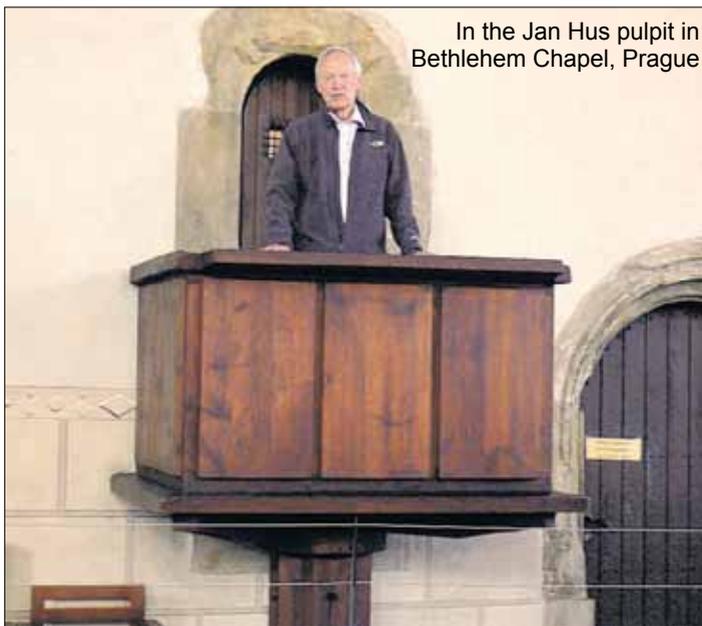
'As much as I can, as well as I can, for as long as I can'

## CZECH REPUBLIC: Meetings and Memories

Until last May it had been forty-two years since I preached in what was then Czechoslovakia, but in September I was back again in the part now called the Czech Republic. This particular invitation came as a result of the May visit, when I preached at a Shepherds' Conference in Kromeriz. My September visit took in Prague and Brno and began in the capital city.

A small Russian church plant had asked me to speak for two nights towards the end of a two-week evangelistic event. This was held in a three sided tent erected in a public square on the bank of the River Vltava and within easy reach of the city centre. Daytime activities had been centred on arts and crafts and included opportunities for visitors to take part, including pottery and painting. A good supply of New Testaments was freely available and there was a stage-based event every night. My first night there was cold, rainy and wind-blown! This badly affected the attendance, although many people stopped for several minutes during the preaching, adding to the small number huddled in the tent.

Several Christian books were made available to purchase, including the Czech translation of *Ultimate Questions*, which has been in the country for some time, *Meet the real Jesus*, which was released in May, and *Where is God when things go wrong?* which was just off the press and not yet officially published. Having this title available was a great encouragement, as was spending time afterwards with drug addict who had come to Christ sixteen years ago and had been clean ever since. 'The gospel is the power...'!



In the Jan Hus pulpit in Bethlehem Chapel, Prague

On the next day a friend took me on a walking tour of Prague. It is often lauded as the most beautiful city in Europe, and I can see why. I especially wanted to re-visit sites that had meant so much to me over forty years ago — Wenceslaus Square, Charles Bridge, the Jan Hus statue and the famous clock, first installed in 1410, in which figures of the twelve apostles appear every hour. We managed to visit all of these, but more importantly went to

Bethlehem Chapel, which was built to provide a preaching centre for Jan Hus, the iconic Reformer. He was appointed rector and preacher there in 1402 and fearlessly preached the gospel, until 1412, to some 3,000 people at a time. When he made a stand against the Roman Catholic trade in indulgencies (almost exactly 100 years before Luther did so) officials stormed the chapel and arrested him. Three years later he was tried, wrongly found guilty of heresy and promptly burned at the stake in Konstanz (now in Germany). Given an opportunity to recant before the flames were lit, he cried, ‘In the same truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached, drawing upon the sayings and positions of the holy doctors, I am ready to die today.’

Bethlehem Chapel has undergone extensive renovations over the years, but parts of Hus’s original pulpit remain. Those in charge of the building kindly unlocked the door which led into the pulpit and allowed me to stand there. As I did so I prayed that God would raise up a godly and courageous successor to a man who kindled the flame of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. The chapel is now owned by the Czech Technical University, but only one (ecumenical) service a year is held there — on 6 July, the anniversary of Hus’s execution. *Ichabod!*

The weather was quieter for my second tent meeting, but the attendance was even lower. I was told this was a metaphor for the spiritual life of Prague, a gorgeous city drowning in atheism and apathy. Czech Christians are free from persecution for only the second time since 1620, but the church is imprisoned in an overwhelmingly secular culture.

From Prague I went to Brno, the nation’s second largest city, and began with a 90-minute session discussing evangelism with church leaders. Brno Baptist Church is the largest Baptist church in the country and the auditorium in its superbly reconstructed building was comfortably filled for the service that night. The same was true on the Sunday, when it was my privilege to preach the gospel to a congregation that included a large number of young people.



With Eva Titeraova in Brno

At the other end of the age range it was a special delight to renew fellowship with Eva Titeraova. Her late husband, Pavel, had been one of my interpreters there forty years ago and I remember with joy her share in those times. Now on the brink of her ninetieth birthday, she translates articles for a Baptist magazine and privately teaches Czech to French and German students. Renewing fellowship with her was not only a delight but a great challenge to ‘press on towards the goal’!

# Packed houses in the Province

The September Popular Christian Apologetics tour of Northern Ireland began with travel problems. My taxi driver went to the wrong house and I just squeaked into Heathrow Airport in time, while Howard Williams' fast ferry was cancelled and he had to make a slower and later sea crossing, arriving at the first evening meeting a few minutes after the scheduled starting time.

My earlier engagement that day was to meet with sixty senior school students for an hour-long Q and A session in **Ballymena, Co. Antrim**, superbly arranged by Ballymena Baptist Church. The questions were all excellent — beginning with one about the existence of God — and as one of the organizers put it: 'You could have heard a pin drop' as I sought to answer them. A copy of *Ultimate Questions* was given to each of the students as they left and the feedback from the meeting can be judged by these comments from teachers:

One said, *'Thank you for inviting us to this event. Those who came were very impressed. The students were given lots to reflect upon and hopefully many will be influenced by what they heard. Teaching RE is challenging in these times and it is good for young people to see that local churches are actually trying to reach out to them and that they care.'* Another said, *'Great reports from pupils and staff. Sixth form pupils are asking if Tuesday night was recorded — pupils and some teachers would like to hear it again.'*

There were nearly 300 at the evening meeting, at which I had been asked to speak on 'Dealing with Dawkins'. A 75-minute presentation left no time for Q and A, but there was



exceptional attention throughout and Howard later reported that the response to the books was the best in ten years of doing these tours.

A long day ended after 11.00pm, when we pitched up in Ballyronan, Co. Londonderry, at the home of Eric and Lorraine Watterson, who were once again our perfect hosts for virtually the whole of the tour.

The next night we were at Hamilton Road Baptist Church in **Bangor, Co. Down**. The pastor is Johnny McClaughlin, whose father, Freddie McClaughlin, pastor of Ballymena Baptist Church, had put almost all of the tour together for us, but was recovering from heart surgery as it took place. Johnny is an enthusiastic 'chip off the old block', leading a fellowship just embarking on a £1.1 million building reconstruction plan. An excellent crowd responded well and provided a fascinating Q and A session which probed the origin of evil

and the issue of prayer in tough times. Howard told me later that the previous night's book sales record had been broken — a significant part of the ministry.

Carr Baptist Church in Lisburn, just outside **Belfast**, was packed on the following night, with extra chairs having to be brought in. Two weeks earlier, Nevin Spence, a brilliant Ulster rugby player, along with two other family members, had been killed in a truly terrible farm accident nearby, and I had been asked to speak on 'Where is God when things go wrong?' There was a palpable sense of God's presence as the subject was developed, and the evangelistic application was made so much more direct by the fact that Nevin Spence had been a committed Christian.

On Friday we were at Cookstown Baptist Church, **Cookstown, Co. Tyrone**. Not having a pastor can hinder preparation for a tour event, but our good friend Alan Sloan and other leaders ensured that the meeting was well advertised and there were very good numbers in the church's fine, functional premises. None of these things can guarantee a good meeting, but we certainly had one.

On Saturday we returned yet again to **Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh**, our fifth county on the tour. Brendan Jones, a local businessman, leads a remarkable work based at The Stables in nearby Derrygore. Listed buildings have been converted into a superb meeting venue that hosts a Christian gathering ten times a year. When we were last there the building was jammed to capacity and I hardly expected a repeat. I was wrong! Extra chairs were brought in from all over the premises, yet there were still people who had to stand. Brendan had asked me to speak on 'Why believe the Bible?' and the presentation was exceptionally well received, not least among the under-30s, who formed a sizeable percentage of the audience. A warm invitation to return next year confirmed what the organizers felt!

The tour ended in Newtownbreda Baptist Church, **Belfast**, the largest Baptist congregation in the Province. Pastor Trevor Ramsey had asked me to preach an evangelistic sermon and it was a privilege to do so to hundreds of worshippers. After the service I met one of Nevin Spence's rugby teammates, who told me some heartening stories of Nevin's sharing of the gospel and of solid witness within the Ulster squad. It was also a special joy to meet a husband and wife who had both come to Christ when I preached in Portstewart exactly forty years earlier. Their testimony to God's grace over the years was the perfect way to end another tour in one of my favourite places on the planet.



# It's tough on tour!

This is a catch-phrase Howard Williams and I often use to each other, but is quirkily used only when we are being exceptionally well treated. During an October tour of the north-west it came to mean something more! We began at Radcliffe Road Baptist Church, **Bury**, where the church was encouragingly well filled for a presentation on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The pastor has since e-mailed to say, 'Thank you for speaking so clearly. There were many non-Christians there on the night, so we have been able to follow up with several good and encouraging conversations.'

On the following day we drove 2½ hours to Emmanuel Church, **Workington**, in Cumbria, which is led by a South African pastor, Tony Pietersen (brother of the well-known international cricketer). His own call to the church (then just a handful of people) a few years ago was remarkable and bore all the signs of God's guiding hand. The church has since tripled in size, superb structural changes have been made to the building, and our meetings drew well over 100 people. The fellowship afterwards was so warm that we could hardly tear ourselves away for the long drive home — and were told, 'The people want you to come back every year'! Tony later wrote, 'Your visit was appreciated and enjoyed by all. We have had significant Gospel chats with folks since then and have had a good response for our *Christianity Explored* course.'

It was midnight before we got to bed that night and at 7.30 the following morning we left for a CVM (Christian Vision for Men) breakfast at a hotel in **Woodford**, Cheshire. Some ninety men gave a great hearing to a message probing the evidence for God's existence. However, I was beginning to feel under the weather and as soon as we reached Howard's home

Early call in Woodford



I crashed out and remained in bed for the next twenty-four hours. This meant missing a meeting in Dovecot Church, **Liverpool**, but Howard and Marlene handled the problem perfectly, monitoring the developing situation during

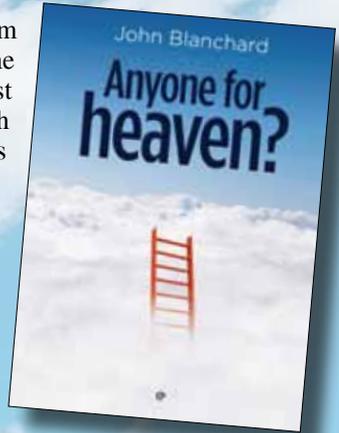
the day, then coping with the meeting at night, when they showed a DVD in which I spoke on 'Can we be good without God?'

I was still prostrate on the Sunday morning and unable to preach at the Williams' home church, Cave Browne EC, **Ashton-in-Makerfield**. I managed the evening service, though I could only preach sitting down. The problem had passed a few days after I returned home, but it did give our slogan an unwelcome new slant!

# A SPECIAL EXTENDED OFFER!

One of the devastating effects of the rising tide of atheism and agnosticism is that countless people have ruled out the very idea that there is life beyond the grave. Arch-atheist Richard Dawkins recently announced on television, 'Death is a full stop', but the Bible teaches otherwise and speaks of heaven and hell as eternal certainties.

Yet the idea of heaven raises countless questions. What does 'heaven' mean? Where is it? Who goes there? When and how does this happen? What happens to the believer's spirit at death? When does his body go there? What will it be like to be there? Will it be boring? Will it ever end? Is heaven the same now as it will always be? These and other questions are all tackled in *Anyone for heaven?* which has been kindly endorsed by a number of Christian leaders including these:



*'Anyone for heaven? is quite simply superb. John Blanchard's plain and easy to read writing style, his breadth of literary knowledge and his excellent understanding of the human spiritual condition makes this a great read. It should be available in churches around the world.'* — **Bishop Frank Retief, Church of England in South Africa.**

*'Anyone for heaven? is thought-provoking and deeply moving and I am very happy to commend it strongly.'* — **Rev. Rico Tice, Assistant Minister, All Souls Church, London and co-author of Christianity Explored.**

*'With an economy of words and a clear flow of biblical insights John has given us a marvelous evangelistic tool. Read this booklet and use it prolifically.'* — **Dr Harry L. Reeder III, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama.**

*'A typically thorough treatment of a subject and issue of which there is so much confusion and wishful thinking today. Great to give to those who are not yet Christians but seriously enquiring about heaven.'* — **Rev. Trevor Archer, FIEC Director of Training.**

The response to *Anyone for heaven?* has been remarkable — the first printing sold out within two weeks but a reprint is available. The booklet retails at £1.99 a copy, but EP Books is extending the special offer previously notified to *Newsline* readers, who can order post free at **£1.60 — or 10+ copies at just £1.00 per copy.**

Order from EP Books, Faverdale North, Darlington DL3 0PH — Tel: 01325 380232 or e-mail: [sales@epbooks.org](mailto:sales@epbooks.org)

# COMING ENGAGEMENTS 2013

At the time of going to press these are my engagements for the next four months. For news of any additional meetings, visit [www.johnblanchard.org](http://www.johnblanchard.org). Please pray for God's enabling and blessing at these events — and plan to attend any scheduled to be held near you.

## JANUARY

- 24 DARLINGTON, Co. Durham: Review and planning meeting at EP Books.  
26-27 EAST KILBRIDE, South Lanarkshire: East Mains Baptist Church, 12 Maxwell Drive, East Mains, East Kilbridge, G74 4HG [Info: 01355 249672 or [douglas@humphris.com](mailto:douglas@humphris.com)]

## FEBRUARY

- 10 WOKING, Surrey: Emmanuel Chapel, 18 Portugal Road, Woking, GU21 5JE [Info: 01483 835 240 or [rj.barwick@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:rj.barwick@yahoo.co.uk)]  
17 WOKING, Surrey: Emmanuel Chapel, 18 Portugal Road, Woking, GU21 5JE [Info: 01483 835 240 or [rj.barwick@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:rj.barwick@yahoo.co.uk)]  
21-28 SOUTH AFRICA: Gauteng Province, including Johannesburg, Randpark Ridge, Sandton, Brackenhurst and Randburg [Info: +27(01) 6729806 or [jjoub@global.co.za](mailto:jjoub@global.co.za)]

## MARCH

- 1-3 SOUTH AFRICA: KwaZulu-Natal, including Durban and Umhlanga [Info: +27(01) 6729806 or [jjoub@global.co.za](mailto:jjoub@global.co.za)]  
4-10 SOUTH AFRICA: Western Cape, including Cape Town, Table View and Tokai [Info: +27(21) 794 7619 or [peter@christianbooks.co.za](mailto:peter@christianbooks.co.za)]  
19-22 IRELAND: Evangelistic meetings in Cork and Kinsale [Info: 353 21 4774251 or 086 2565407 or [madeinkinsale@gmail.com](mailto:madeinkinsale@gmail.com)]  
29 DOVER, Kent: 463<sup>rd</sup> annual Good Friday services in Eythorne Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, Eythorne, CT15 4AY [Info: 01304 830 595 or [battenfield46@btinternet.com](mailto:battenfield46@btinternet.com)]

## APRIL

- 14 UNITED STATES: First Presbyterian Church, 200 West Washington Street, Greenville, S. Carolina 29601 [Info: (864) 235 0496 or [contactus@firstpresgreenville.org](mailto:contactus@firstpresgreenville.org)]  
15-19 UNITED STATES: The Reserve, Lake Keowee, 190 Village Green Loop, SUNSET, S. Carolina 29635 [Info: (404) 642 9722 or [GeoLeeGolf@gmail.com](mailto:GeoLeeGolf@gmail.com)]  
21-23 UNITED STATES: Redeemer Community Church, 9108 North Rodney Parham Road, Little Rock, Arkansas 72212 [Info: (501) 225 4636 or [redeemer@redeemerlr.org](mailto:redeemer@redeemerlr.org)]  
24-28am UNITED STATES: Arrow Heights Baptist Church, 3201 S. Elm Place, Broken Arrow, Oklahoma 74012 [Info: (918) 455 5020 or [bgreen@arrowheights.org](mailto:bgreen@arrowheights.org)]  
28pm-30 UNITED STATES: Emmanuel Baptist Church, 2505 West Owen K Garriott Road Enid, OK 73703 [Info: (580) 237 0602 or [contactus@ebcenid.org](mailto:contactus@ebcenid.org)]

## JOIN THE TEAM!

Thank you for reading *Newsline*. If you have not seen it before and would like to receive future copies (by post or e-mail) please let me know at:

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