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From the Guesthouse of Benevolence

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From the Guesthouse of Benevolence

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The first thing (Andrew) did was to find his brother Simon. ... He brought Simon to Jesus ...

- John 1: 41, 42 (NEB)

LET ME INTRODUCE to you three people I met on a recent visit to China, and one person we were meant to meet! I was part of a delegation of eighteen – Anglican, Free Church and Roman Catholic; women and men, lay and ordained, three of whom were Chinese speakers – organised by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) to express solidarity with the Church in China - Protestant and Catholic, and to share experiences and learn from them.

Over ten days we visited five provinces around China's North Eastern seaboard. We smelt the smog in Beijing, we breathed the pure air of the Yellow Mountain in the spectacular Huang Shan region, and we whizzed through the Forbidden City and Tian-anmen Square, like American Tourists on roller skates!

We were also taken to lots of official banquets which, apart from being very enjoyable, made us question whether our ways of entertaining foreign delegations in Britain and Ireland is always as generous as it should be. And, indeed, some of our most revealing insights came while dipping with our chopsticks into dishes of stewed shark's fin or braised abalone and eating a consommé of bamboo pith!

Apart from the value of visits like ours to those at the receiving end in terms of friendship and encouragement, there is also the challenge from Churches in other parts of the world to how we live the faith in these islands.

The last emperor

The first person I want to introduce to you is Mr Wang Zuo An. He's not a Christian. He's a senior member of the Chinese Communist Party, and in our terms the equivalent of a Minister of State in, say, the

Home Office. His department is responsible for regulating the practice of religion in China.

On a delegation to the UK a few weeks prior to our visit, Mr Wang had unexpectedly admitted at a reception hosted by CTBI that religion will continue to exist in China when the Communist Party is no more. Now he was returning the courtesy by receiving us in his new offices in Beijing. These were located in the palace belonging to the last emperor's father. And as we sat on leather settees sipping green tea from rather fine lidded mugs, I must admit my mind wandered a bit as I imagined the two year old emperor, Pu Yi, playing hide and seek in the courtyard outside!

Pulling myself together I asked Mr Wang what changes in religion he'd detected in his ten years in office. 'After the cultural revolution' (which lasted some ten years and was brought to an end with Mao's death in 1976) 'people are now allowed to practice their faith openly,' he told us. Then he added this, 'Now the challenge is to explore how religion can contribute to the culture. Maybe the Church needs to research this,' he suggested, 'and to present some proposals to be discussed with government.'

It's a reply that reveals two things: on the one hand, the changing attitude of the Party to Religion. It is no longer seen as the opium of the masses, but as something with positive social consequences. And on the other, it invites Christians to become more involved in their society, and not to regard their faith as a purely private matter, which was quite a challenge coming as it did from a mouthpiece of an officially atheistic state!

Of course, we were under no illusion that this meant a relaxation of government control, or that it was more prepared to countenance dissent. But it was an indication that those in power in China today are interested in working more constructively with the Church and other religions than has been the case in the past.

And if there's a word here for us, maybe it is that with our almost unlimited democratic freedom we too do not fail to take up the challenges thrown our way by government.

Our guide

The second person I want to introduce to you is Mr Ma Hong Zhi. He's the Chinese person we got to know best on this visit. Some 30 years of age, married with a three and a half old son, he was our official accompanist and translator. He met us when we arrived in the airport in Beijing, and he stayed with us until he'd waved us through customs at Shanghai.

I warmed to Hong Zhi – or Daniel as he invited us to call him, because I saw him as an example of the new Chinese generation committed to what the state is accomplishing but also willing to make a Christian commitment. So on the third leg of our itinerary, when we'd flown in to the old imperial capital of Nanjing, his home town, and were being bussed to our hotel and not at our most alert because of the lateness of the hour, he decided to share

his testimony with us!

He told us he'd come from a non-Christian background, but as a little boy would go and spend the holidays with his grandmother in the country. When the churches were re-opened after the cultural revolution (and it is hard to imagine the havoc and suffering of that period for millions of Chinese) she started going to a local church, and took her young grandson with her. There weren't many Chinese bibles around in those days (since then 30 million have been printed, and we saw them still coming off the presses in Nanjing at the rate of one every 30 seconds!). Young Hong Zhi would therefore copy out passages of the Bible and favourite hymns for his grandmother, not from the originals, but from copies of copies. In the process he became interested in the Faith. And in 1994, after graduating in economics, Hong Zhi was baptised and made a member of the post denominational Protestant Church.

Now he's an employee of his church in their national overseas relations department in bustling Shanghai with its 16m population, looking after delegations like ours. Because religion is regulated by the state, Hong Zhi therefore works for the state as well as for the church. In his culture, Hong Zhi was maintaining some kind of balance between his faith and his service to the state and his love of country.

In our Western culture it seems to me we sometimes forget that there are young Christians, and not so young, who are also trying to make responsible compromises most days of their working lives. The church needs to be an understanding community that supports and strengthens them in the choices they face.

Re-imagining the Faith

Before I introduce my final witness, this might be an appropriate point to mention

someone we were meant to meet, but didn't. He was K H Ting, the last surviving bishop of the post-denominational Protestant Church. I first came across Bishop Ting in Canberra in 1991 when the China Christian Council joined the World Council of Churches. Our delegation was scheduled to meet him in Nanjing, but unless I'm judging him unfairly, he had a diplomatic illness at the last minute!

Bishop Ting is the grand old man of China's Protestant Church. At 89 years of age, he's lived through many of the upheavals of China's recent history, and even in a culture that's four thousand years old, the twentieth century is regarded by today's Chinese as particularly turbulent.

He's been a formative figure in the 50 year old post denominational church that works on the premise of being independently funded and run, and that handles its own outreach without foreign interference - the so called 'Three Self Movement'. It doesn't, however, bar the Nanjing Amity Printing company from accepting bales of good quality paper from the West for printing Bibles, or the China Christian Council from receiving donations towards church building schemes. Chinese Christians are also proud to emphasise that Christianity in China goes back to the 7th century.

Chinese Christians also honour the memory of the 15th century Jesuit Matteo Ricci, but are more ambivalent about the contribution of more recent protestant missionaries seeing them as imperialist lackeys! The 19th century Welsh Baptist missionary, Timothy Richard, for example, is singled out for opprobrium in their Golden Jubilee album for acting as an interpreter in the negotiations during the Qing dynasty that led to the humiliating Xinchou Treaty of 1900.

Bishop Ding was instrumental therefore in finding ways of living with, and influencing an initially hostile Communist Party, so that today it is prepared to see Christianity, in the words of the Vice-minister of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), as 'something that can purify people's soul'.

Recently, though, Bishop Ting has been at the centre of a controversial movement that we might term 'Re-Imagining the Faith', or what they call 'Theological Reconstruction' or 'Theological Renewal'. It's controversial because it tries to demonstrate that Christianity is not necessarily inimical to an atheistic state and can therefore safely be taken into the main stream of contemporary Chinese life.

One illustration of this that might seem far fetched to us but is very much at the heart of a restructured theology concerns Chian Kai-shek and Mao Zedong. If you teach that Christians go to heaven, and atheists don't (the doctrine of Justification by Faith), it is unlikely to endear you to a state that reveres the atheist Chairman Mao and reviles the baptised anti-communist nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek!

So Ting has been commending what he calls a 'Theology of Love'. Since Christ's love fills the cosmos, runs his argument, Christ's love can go beyond the church to reach those outside it. Moreover, manifestations of the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit can even be seen in the person of atheists. From what we could gather that is the line now followed at the Union Theological Seminary in Nanjing, the Protestant church's principal college. It's impossible for us to judge the merits or otherwise of this approach at this distance, but clearly it's a huge issue for the post-denominational church in China.

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Although during the last century major disasters at Baptist Churches have not happened too frequently they nevertheless do occur and the floods in Boscastle last year reminded me of just one case where I was closely involved.

"At 6pm on 30th October 2000 after days of torrential rain the River Roding in Essex burst its banks with devastating effect on the locality of Broadmead Church in Woodford.

I had reason to be outside the church that evening and was able to experience at first hand the power of a river unencumbered by its banks flooding all the local roads, gardens and buildings within its path. First in line were the church buildings which were quickly encompassed to a depth of some three feet in everything the river could throw at them. There was absolutely nothing anyone could do except flee to safety and pray that the torrents would stop.

The next day the river had not yet receded and I waded thigh high through the flood waters towards the church sympathising with the odd householder here and there. From some of their fairly cheerful responses, considering they were surrounded by water, I got a great feeling that a real community spirit had emerged in their adversity. Nothing was going to get them down!

That same spirit was much in evidence with members of Broadmead Church when it came to attending to their own problems. Their buildings were unusable and all the church contents had been saturated beyond repair. They clearly needed all the help that they could get to supplement their own willing resources.

Baptist Insurance would help to recover their premises but nothing had prepared them for the disruption to all their activities on such a massive scale. Led by their Minister, Ken Hyde, church members set to in seeking somewhere to try and carry on as near normal while restoration work was carried out. Their prayers were quickly answered with suitable accommodation being made available nearby.

The restoration of the buildings presented somewhat greater and longer term problems, not least that the premises needed drying out first! However after what must have seemed a lifetime the church was finally brought back to sparkling newness and I was so pleased to accept the invitation of the church to attend their rededication service."

In these times when companies just come and go Baptist Insurance takes great pride that we are the chosen insurer of the majority of the Baptist Churches in the UK. In the coming months we shall be inviting existing customers to participate in several competitions for valuable prizes as part of our centenary celebrations. To new customers we shall be offering a £100 discount off the first premium should they decide to insure their church with us.

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I think the lesson for us is that we too have to attempt to 're-imagine' the faith if it's to make sense in our culture and to win a new generation of believers. And the challenge always is how to be true to the Gospel we've received, whilst at the same time touching those chords that resonate with a generation that no longer goes to church.

Walk in the water

The last person I want you to meet is a woman minister in her 40s, the Revd Ma Jianhua, or Pastor Esther. She leads a team of over ten lay leaders in Huang Shan City, Anhui province, skirting one of the two most famous landscapes in the whole of China. In 2004 they celebrated the 10th anniversary of their 1,000 seater church, and the Sunday morning we were there it was pretty full with what seemed to us a good cross section of the community including teachers, doctors, business people, farmers, factory workers and students.

Pastor Ma preached for 40 minutes, supported by numerous Biblical references each of which was eagerly looked up by members of her congregation thumbing through their personal copies of the Scriptures. Though most of our delegation couldn't understand a word of what Pastor Ma was saying, it was spell binding to watch her and to feel the concentration of the congregation because of the quiet intensity and earnestness that came across in her personality.

Pastor Ma (at her own expense, we gathered) gave each member of our delegation a presentation box containing a 5 sq cm finely polished stone seal and wax dip marking the church's anniversary. Mine now has a place of honour in the CYTUN office. The engraving in Chinese characters, proclaiming that 'The Lord is the Living Stone', symbolises to my mind the strength of this church and its leadership. An accompanying leaflet

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explains that 'everyone needs a personal mark. For Westerners, it's a signature, for Chinese it's a seal, and that seal represents the heart of the giver. For just as no two leaves are the same, no two stones are ever identical. Each is unique.'

In one of the rural branch churches (what they call 'Meeting Places') which Pastor Ma is responsible for, we heard of a poor farmer who'd sold a pig as his contribution towards the new church in his village. Another elderly woman had taken on extra work as a domestic help, and gave all her wages to the new building. In such desperately poor rural communities, we found that deeply moving and rather humbling.

On the Saturday evening Pastor Ma had organised a special Bible Study for some of the locals to meet us. In my group there were two young men in their early 20s from the local university. I discovered that for one of them it was his first time in church. He'd only come because his friend had invited him. It was a pattern we'd heard repeated in numerous places throughout our visit. In a country where you cannot proselytise openly, or distribute leaflets, people are being drawn into the Body of Christ through the witness of a partner, parent, grandparent, child or friend.

We don't find it natural to ask others along to a service. In China that's the way the church is growing.

After meeting her, and staying at her Guesthouse of Benevolence, we could understand why the Protestant Church in particular in China is on the increase. According to one source, 'China is in the process of being Christianized' (David Aikman: *Jesus in Beijing*). And I can believe it, especially as a week earlier I'd had the amazing experience of preaching to a congregation of 800 in the Gang Wa Shi

church in central Beijing, in what was its fourth service of the day! 'At the present rate of growth in the number of Christians in the countryside, in the cities and especially within China's social and cultural establishment, it is possible,' according to this observer, 'that Christians will constitute 20 to 30% of China's (1.3 billion) population within three decades.'

Our young translator, Ma Hong Zhi, shared a Chinese proverb with us before we left: 'Hold a stone and walk in the water'. He interpreted it for us as recommending you need to have something solid to grasp if you're to maintain your balance in rough waters. Maybe that's the secret of the persistence and growth of China's Christians.

We went to China in friendship and to express Christian solidarity. We came back from China challenged by those we met, to:

- *look again at how we respond to the challenges thrown our way by our own governments;*
- *see whether we can't support people more effectively in the daily compromises they have to make;*
- *be willing to re-imagine the Gospel so that it makes sense to a new generation, whilst also remaining true to its basic credo; and*
- *help people bear personal testimony to Jesus in our culture.*

Don't stay in the dark



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