

The Vintage Voice

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Blessings from Jesus

The Rev. Frank E. Wismer III

I had the privilege of serving our country as a chaplain in the Armed Services. I had an even greater honor of serving with the Army in Iraq from April of 2003 to May of 2004. I had been in Baghdad for a couple of months when I was introduced to the Rev. Canon Andrew White (the Vicar of Baghdad) and invited to join him for worship at St. George's Anglican Church located about one mile outside the "Assassin's Gate" at the north entrance to the "Green Zone."

Andrew had been visiting Baghdad about once a month and conducting services for the small congregation that worshiped in a rundown church building built by the British following the First World War. Because Canon White could only conduct services on a monthly basis, the congregation of Arabic-speaking members had dwindled. So, on my first Sunday, there were only fifty-three people in church. Yet here, in what appeared to be a sea of Islam, I had discovered an Anglican parish, a spiritual home away from home. After worshiping with this Christian community and meeting the people, I was convinced that I had been given a gift from God that was to nurture and sustain me during my time in Iraq. Moreover, I felt convicted by the fidelity of this small Christian band in an environment that was sometimes hostile to the Gospel. I, therefore, informed Canon White that I would conduct a weekly service at St. George's while deployed to Baghdad.

I must confess that my time serving as the priest of that parish was the most interesting and exciting parochial ministry of my entire priesthood. It was also the most dangerous and terrifying. Each Sunday, Maher Dahkil, who also served as my linguist at worship, secreted me out of the Green Zone. Maher had been a Mandaean until converting to Christianity. The Mandeans are the descendants of the disciples of John the Baptist. After his conversion, Maher had spent time in prison for proclaiming the Christian Gospel to Muslims.

On my first Sunday at St. George's, I asked Maher to tell me what some members of the congregation were discussing after church. Maher explained that he didn't have a clue, as they were speaking Aramaic. In seminary, I distinctly remember being told that Aramaic was a dead language, but here in the congregation I had been called to serve, many were speaking the language of Jesus. I had stepped back into biblical times. I was living in the land of the Garden of Eden. This was the country of Abraham's birth. Here could be found the tomb of Ezekiel. This was the place where the Jews had been carted off into captivity in Babylon. One could see the Tel that had been the Tower of Babel or the ground that may have been the place Daniel was fed to the lions. This was still the land where some of John's disciples, like Maher, had stopped following the Baptist to follow Jesus.

It was Christmas Day of 2003, and I was leading the worship at St. George's. I also had responsibilities for worship at the palace (Saddam's former Presidential Palace, then home to the Coalition Provisional Authority), so the services at St. George's were conducted at 4 pm. When the service ended, something very special occurred.

My journal entry for the day read, "*The big thing on Christmas Day is the holiday meal. There was everything under the sun. I had prime rib . . . not bad, but not thick. They even had eggnog. . . .*

In the afternoon, I went into Baghdad for church at St. George's. The children were wired just like children anywhere! It was a zoo. The children's homily was impossible, but it worked out OK. Santa even made an appearance. But, the big deal to me was the 20 Muslims (mostly women) from a wedding party that showed up looking for blessings from Jesus for the couple who had just married."

Apparently, the wedding reception had occurred right across the street, and the group of Muslim women had seen the neon cross atop the church. That neon light, the Light of Christ, had beckoned them. They had come to the church for a very important reason. They wanted the newlyweds to have a prosperous and joy-filled life together. How better to do this than to come over to the church and get blessings from Jesus? Christmas Day in 2003 was the first of two occasions when groups of Muslims would visit St. George's Anglican Church seeking blessings from Jesus and also from the Virgin Mary.

Whenever I recall that Christmas Day of 2003, I am reminded of that neon light, shining in the night in a country that does not often behold the light of Christ. And yet this group of pilgrims of another strong faith were attracted to it and approached with reverence, seeking out the blessing of the Christ Child.

By the time I left Baghdad in 2004, St. George's had grown from a congregation of fifty-three to a congregation of two hundred and twenty. That congregation has continued to grow over the past eight years and now numbers in the thousands. There are so many members of the congregation now, in fact, that services must be conducted all day Saturday and all day Sunday to accommodate the worshipping community. St. George's is also the first church in the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf to raise up and then ordain an Arab priest.

Today there are many more members of the congregation who have stopped following John the Baptist and begun following Jesus. And, there are others who have discovered that Jesus is not merely a prophet, but the Son of God, the Incarnate Lord. They too have seen the Christmas Light and are following where it leads.



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