

crossing cultures ... Iraq & Lebanon

Rachel Thomas and Kathryn Coalter describe a trip to the Middle East



Iraq

Jesus taught us to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). How do you love someone who killed your family, plundered your home and destroyed your city?

Iraqis have suffered a new war every decade for 100 years. The resilience and generosity of the Iraqis we met was inspirational. Their pain and hardship is real but it has not overtaken the compassion, love and deep family bonds people have for one another.

In recent years, Erbil has been a refuge for many people fleeing ISIS. Wasu, a biologist from Mosul, fled to Erbil after the first three mortars hit and has not been back since. Her home was destroyed. Zain, an Erbil resident, described looking out of his window one morning to see 100,000 people crowding the streets.

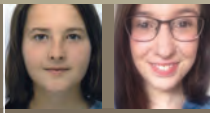
During our stay here, we visited three different refugee camps and helped set up two clinics. Each camp was so different. The central camp was for Christians from villages surrounding Mosul. It consisted of the top three floors of a mall. At the time of the refugee crisis, the apartments were unfinished so the owner donated them to Christian refugees. During our visit, we were invited to join a family for tea. Middle Eastern hospitality is something many people tell you about, but you cannot appreciate completely until you are there. The father of this household had lost his arm in the Iran-Iraq war 20 years earlier but still drove! After two years in Erbil, their primary hope was to return home.

Another clinic was in a camp on the outskirts of the city. The contrast in living conditions was great. People were staying in tents in a large field, with little access to the town. The camp was run by the government and well structured - with a doctor, school, mosque and a 24-hour guard. When we arrived, the electricity was down (a regular occurrence) so we did not have air conditioning, and had to work in 40C heat. Still this was nothing compared to the trials of the people we tried to treat. People came with an array of physical symptoms of trauma, from IBS to panic attacks. It was hard to provide only minimal care for people who needed more than a one-off consultation.

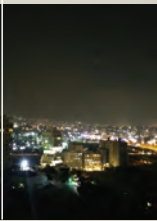
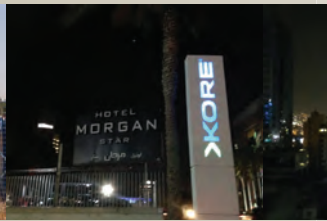
One of the missionaries we met was providing support for people with disabilities. His dedication to building good relationships and listening to their stories has provided multiple opportunities to share the gospel: and many have responded. Please pray for him and his team.

Please join me in praying for this country, which is groaning in pain. Most Iraqis have experienced significant trauma. Churches are providing some emotional support for people in refugee camps but the scale is just too big. Please pray for more volunteers who are steeped in Jesus' love to work in the refugee camps, to be a friend to the lonely and 'to proclaim good news to the poor' (Isaiah 61:1).

The names of those we met have been changed for their protection.



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Lebanon

Beirut is a high-rise metropolis and comes with American-style shopping and French-named streets. Strangely not the picture I have in mind when I think 'refugee mission'. One in four people in Lebanon are refugees.¹ That's roughly equal to the percentage of people in the United Kingdom that have a degree.

Refugees are not viewed amicably by the Lebanese people. Obligated to pay residency permits of US\$200 per year and pledge not to work,² it is really surprising that 70% of refugees live below the extreme poverty line?³ Farming illegally for minute incomes and living off UNHCR food packages, these families struggle to make ends meet. Their only options are to generate a livelihood in Lebanon, or return to the barrel bombs and chemical warfare of home. It's difficult to put into words the living conditions of the homes of the people we met in the Bekaa Valley. Even the thought of spending winter in a tent causes shivers in my bones.

Yet what struck me most was how these people were doing mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Maybe you struggle to grasp the reality of these lives; their suffering is just too foreign to comprehend. I have found that it can affect us in one of three ways; we can ignore it, become apathetic, or let it propel us into action.

When your engagement is blunted by your own trials, I would remind you of the last supper. Jesus knew that he was going to die soon and would be whipped and mocked before. He knew his followers would suffer too. But he begins the night by

washing their dusty feet. I catch my breath thinking that Jesus chooses to serve in his suffering, and chose to trust his father in this.

If you struggle with feeling apathetic, I hope you can take encouragement from reading about how Jesus spent his time on this earth. I love reading of his conversations with women and children, with tax collectors and foreigners. He didn't spend time with people who were down-and-out just to tick a box. It wasn't for a 'well done Son' and a pat on the back from his Father. And it definitely wasn't to receive honour and status from his peers. Jesus loved people.

When you're ready to act, be 'God's hands and feet on Earth', as Teresa of Avila describes us. For the Lebanese church this looked like feeding children and teaching women to make soap. Maybe for you this looks like sharing your skills, your time or your money. How different could these refugee camps look if we were serious about spending time with the down-and-outs and get busy washing feet? What brilliant glimpses of God's kingdom could these people see if we chose to trust him in this? ■

REFERENCES

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