**Europassion - KONGRESS: 13.- 15. April 2012 Schonberg/St.Vith**

I travelled with Alex Stewart-Clark from the Passion Trust,

England, who has recently been helping out with the Brighton Passion Play in

front of a couple thousand people on a beach. A good tip was to get leaflets

handed out by hunky "centurions" during the previous weekend. There was a

good uptake. Alex had an interesting theory about what was needed for

putting on a passion play - he went around asking what people thought first

a) getting people to Cooperate, in a team spirit, each having something to

contribute or be responsible for.

b) Community Project - engendered by eating together (and praying together)

c) A Clear Vision: "The people without a vision perish"

I was most impressed by his generosity. He told a wonderful story of having

£3000 in the pot and being nudged by God to give it all away as an act of

faith. The committee chose a Pro-Life group in Brighton.

Linzy was delighted to hear the end of the story - they then got an anonymous

£10,000. I think it was for staging or something similar.

On the ferry home, I had offered to buy dinner for us all but Alex paid for the

drinks and the meal and said it was the first donation to the Abingdon Passion

play project (we have not even got a Treasurer!). He certainly knows how to

get the ball rolling....

We began the first evening with the usual European introductory welcoming

talks at the Kulturhaus Ourgrundia Atzerath behind a church. I was glad we

had arrived an hour late. The four languages used were Flemish, French,

German and Italian. I had not known that this conference was not going to be

in English at all and I am very rusty at languages. It was amusing to hear each

translator have to compete with the crowd listening because when one

language group had understood the message they went back to their voluble

chatter leaving the rest of us straining to decipher the next translators'

message!

I was relieved when Jolyon Mitchell, from Edinburgh Uni, joined our table as

an observer (Professor of Communications, Arts and Religion at the Centre

for Theology) along with Lex, who I think was French, but could manage to

speak in English. They were both very welcoming and the table decorations

were superb in a sort of lurid green and pink. The food was excellent all the

time and plenty of Belgian beer and wine flowed. The most hilarious point of

the evening was watching some beautifully choreographed dancers (8 year

olds supported by energetic teenagers) dancing to their choice of pop music -

"I want to get wasted" in a Glaswegian accent. We thought they surely did not

have a translator for that! This was followed by some lovely harmonised

singing which I appreciated very much. It was in "English" and was quite

worshipful. The songs were old spirituals such as being in the BUZZOM of

Abraham.

We stayed in a lovely hotel, Hubert, in Schonberg right in the centre of the

village. A kind man in the bar took pity on us and drove in front of us for 10km

to show us the way to the dinner on the opening night. Very kind of him else

we would never have found it. At breakfast we were talking to the mayor of

Oberammergau. He is not allowed to act in the play as he has only lived there

for 15 years. I told him about the difficulty Abingdon Town Twinners had in

visiting the play in 2010 as one is forced to be accommodated in the town and

not in outlying towns such as Schongau, where we have friends. Of course,

some of the German towns had continuous traditions going back 400 years.

We felt very humble having not even organised a Passion play yet in

Abingdon, though there was one in Oxford this year and the Trafalgar Square

and Brighton ones have been going a few years. I suppose I could have

mentioned the English 14th century tradition of performing plays from sunrise

to sunset on Corpus Christi Day when they travelled on wagons and

performed in York at various stations, but I didn't!

The main conference started the next day in St Vith, a bigger town, at their

conference centre called the Triangel. It was good to meet Marlene who gave

the introductory welcome at 9am. She later gave me an English translation of

what she had said (at church on the Sunday morning) which was most

helpful.She welcomed the special guests: Bishop Aloys Jousten; the mayor,

Christian Krings; the Minister form the German speaking people's parliament,

Isabelle Weykmans; the spiritual adviser of the Europassion, Siegfried

Bongartz – who initiated the passion plays in Schonberg 20 years ago and the

Dean Jean Pohlen plus members of the bureau of Europassion and all the

delegates from all sorts of countries. She said, (to us later that she was a

farmer's wife) that in 1993 she had hoped that passion plays would continue

in the small parishes and that her dream, after attending the Europassion

meeting in Tegelen in 1997, was that her town could invite delegations from

all over Europe and host the Europassion in Schoenberg. A famous song

goes "If somebody dreams alone, it's only a dream - if a lot of people have the

same dream, their dreams become reality". She was obviously thrilled that it

was becoming a reality. They had known about this conference for 5 years.

The way was not easy. They had to work hard. They never gave up. They

were always very confident. Confidence (or TRUST) was the most important

virtue over the last years. Without confidence there is no way to launch into

such an undertaking as passion plays. You have to believe in God and men

who work together to set up such a beautiful project.

This opening was followed by various speeches and then a sermon by the

bishop which was translated for us, by Alfonzo, luckily, Everyone else was

listening on head phones but they had not catered for zee Eeenglish! The theme of the new Passion play which was on three levels, was the Road to Emmaus, a modern drama and the events of Holy Week – acted by amateurs. Their aim was to tell people that Jesus loves them - to make an announcement of the Christian message. It is obvious that we would all be happier if we lived what Jesus told. The Bishop said he had been to the first performance of this version of the Passion play on its opening night, March 10th. He sent his congratulations to the actors.

He mainly talked about the journey of the two disciples from Jerusalem to

Emmaus (about 7 miles). They were resigned at the start. The Bishop wanted

to explain the different steps of their journey to realising it was Jesus! v.13-16.

Community of two people. Jesus is the 3rd man who helps to find a solution to

their problem. It would be a good beginning to Christian life in our parishes.

v.17-21. They tell their hopes they thought Jesus would fulfil. They feel

deceived as the Jesus as Saviour of the World was quite different from what

they expected. No mighty power. Why did he want to go to Jerusalem? He

didn't listen to us. At the Last Supper He had said the first man is the one who

serves the other. Jesus' death does not make sense to them. v.21 -27. This

morning some women reported that they had seen him. They were thinking

"How can we believe that Jesus is alive when we haven't seen HIm?" It is

necessary to open their hearts first, No one can help them find this belief.

Jesus must open their hearts by asking questions. We should read the whole

Passion story. When they reflect on the story in a lot of flashbacks they begin

to understand who/what Jesus really was. Their feeling of being deceived

turns into open mindedness.

Therefore we, as Christians, should reread the story to make us ready to transport the message to others. Jesus trusted in God to go this way (up to Jerusalem). He had announced his forthcoming resurrection several times. The disciples begin to feel there is some hope beginning to burn in their hearts. v.28-32. They arrive home and invite Him for dinner (like at Zacchaeus' house - parallelism). Jesus was the guest but He is the one who breaks the bread. He did it in his usual way. This was the Foundation of the church. Jesus was with the two disciples as He is with us.

The Eucharistic meal is the central point of the Christian community. v.33-35.

they go back and tell the other disciples. Joyfully. Another symbol was that

they took up their stick and went back to see the others - be ready to take up

your stick and go into the world. Transformation of the disciples as now they

believe He really lives. They are completely changed from sadness to

enthusiasm.

Though the Passion play we saw was directed on three levels, the Bishop

was saying that there was a fourth dimension - in our own hearts. We have to

take what we see and broadcast it. A performance of a Passion play is not

complete without a resurrection/ Emmaus story. In conclusion he said that we

have a lot of things that are not explained yet - that's the starting point of the

Emmaus story. Many people live in sadness. We need not know all the

answers but we have this trust/belief/hope to pass on. There was an optional

guided tour which I avoided. I saw a little church with mosaic stations of the

Cross and sat down for half an hour and prayed for my sons. I had previously

looked at the map of where all the delegates had come from (as far afield as

Scotland! to Hungary and Portugal and Southern Italy). Every Passion play

was different and each country/parish had its own traditions and inevitable

DVD or programme to hand out. It was interesting talking to people.

Then there was a splendid lunch in a leisure hall which was followed by a coach trip

to a "grotto" with a cavalry at the top of the hill. They very generously provided

some rice cake and we visited a chocolate shop which was more like it! In the

evening was the new Passion Play (unfortunately in German). It seemed a bit

bitty because it flitted between the various dimensions. Obviously with big

crowd scenes it took awhile for people to file on and off - perhaps a bit of flow

of the action was lost then? It was interesting to have a different take on the

Crucifixion which was actually beautiful! We met some actors afterwards and

chatted until the small hours.

It was delightful to meet nearly everyone the next day for a Church service , Konig-Baudouin-Platz for a solemn Mass. We had our photos taken en masse too! There was another sumptuous lunch and then we said our fond farewells and missed our booked ferry. Luckily God arranged it so that it was the correct ferry to meet my neighbour, Hildegard, from Abingdon and so I had a door to door service from Dover to home -amazing provision! As I had been ill, according to my mother-in-law, it was

very foolish of me to have gone at all. I know that I was right to have travelled

to this conference though and will remember it for ages and hopefully be inspired by their perseverance and generosity.

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