

Sleepless in Georgia

door Malkhaz Songulashvili

Sometime after the New Year my Orthodox friend Archimandrite Kyrion and I went for drinks in the Eagle and Child pub, familiarly known in the Oxford community as The Bird and Baby. This is my favourite pub. I like it for various reasons. This is a pub which used to be frequented by the members of the Inklings, an informal literary discussion group associated with the University of Oxford: J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams, Tolkien's son Christopher, Lewis' elder brother Warren, and others. They went there to drink a pint of beer and discuss literature. In those days pubs did not offer food, just drinks. I also like it because they have good food and the people there are extremely kind.

“I am buying the drinks”, declared Kyrion as we entered the pub and greeted the pub manager, a lovely young lady. I did not argue with him because there was no point. Once he has made a decision you cannot stop him.

“I am having a pint of beer. What do you like to drink?” asked Kyrion.

“Well, perhaps a nice cup of tea...”, I mumbled.

“With rum, as usual, I suppose?” Kyrion looked at me with a cheeky smile on his face.

“Yes, with rum it is”, I said and wanted to add “Earl Grey tea, please”, but Kyrion by that time had vanished into the narrow passages of the pub. He came back in a few minutes with a pint of beer and a cup of tea with rum in it. We happily settled in the back room of the pub, sipped our drinks and chatted about the political situation in Georgia and the state of religious affairs in Georgia and Ukraine.

“What are your plans for January?” asked Kyrion suddenly.

“Well, I will have my ‘Day of Judgment’, the viva first. Then I would like to go to Georgia for a short visit, if I can manage it.”

“What are you going to do in Georgia?”

“Bishop Stephen Platten is going there in a small delegation and asked me to escort him. He wants me to arrange his meetings with Georgian politicians and religious leaders. At the same time my American friend, Roy Medley, is bringing a delegation to Georgia and he also wants me to meet his people in Tbilisi, but I will not be able to go.”

“Why not?” asked Kyrion, curiously.

“I have no funds for the tickets, I am poor student!” I answered, joking nervously.

“You were told many a times to convert to Orthodoxy. Now you would have been be an Orthodox prince-bishop and have a lot of money!” jeered back Kyrion. He was right: I had been asked by the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church and other hierarchs to join the Orthodox Church and become an Orthodox bishop.

“Yes, it is good to have money but to have freedom is even better,” I replied in a defensive tone. I think I was honest by saying that. If I was an Orthodox bishop I would have all the money I would need, but would have no freedom to do things that my own church allows me to do. I did not feel comfortable arguing with Kyrion about the matter and suggested we change the subject of the conversation. Kyrion said nothing, but two days later he told me that he had booked two return tickets to Georgia, one for me and one for Ala, my wife. I was speechless. Ala was also surprised because she did not even think that she would be going to Georgia. I could not even thank him properly.

“I do not know how to thank you for this...” I started, but was immediately interrupted by Kyrion.

“This is my gift to both of you and there is no need to thank me.”

This is how it started. But before I continue I need to introduce my friends. Please meet Bishop Stephen Platten. He is a good friend of mine and of Georgia. I met him almost twenty years ago. He was a young priest in training with the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, who visited us in our cathedral in Tbilisi and delivered a sermon. Twenty years ago I was also young, believe it or not. I was still a layman and taught at the Tbilisi State University. I translated for the Archbishop at the Baptist Cathedral and was invited to go to a dinner given in his honour. The dinner was given at the Palace of Marriages, where the Soviet version of a wedding was usually held. The building looked like a cathedral with a bell tower and large bells which did not toll. At the dinner the archbishop asked about my work and life.

“If there is anything I could do, do not hesitate to ask”, said the archbishop out of sheer politeness. But I thought I could ask something.

“I am translating The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis but we have not secured copyright from the publishers to publish it in Georgian. Can you help with this?”, I asked the archbishop.

“We will be happy to help”, said the archbishop in a deep voice and called his ecumenical officer.

“Would you help this friend of ours to secure copyright for The Chronicles of Narnia?” the archbishop asked his ecumenical officer who looked rather puzzled by the archbishop’s request.

“Of course we will”, said the officer and looked at me with a certain amount of curiosity. This officer was Canon Stephen Platten, whom I had already met. Neither Stephen nor I would have thought that day that we would become close friends and later on would be called “the terrible twins.” Stephen was soon to become the Dean of Norwich, then some years later Bishop of Wakefield, and ended up in the House of Lords at Westminster. Now Stephen was coming to Georgia as a leading bishop of the Church of England on Georgia and also a leading bishop in the House of Lords on the issues of security and defence. Bishop Stephen was to be accompanied by Dr. Charles Reed, an analytical thinker at Church House, London. The visit of Bishop Stephen was to overlap with the visit of the American delegation, which was going to be a logistical challenge. But our Bishops Merab, Rusudan and Ilia were ready to make these two visits as comfortable as possible.

Let me now introduce another good friend of mine who was coming to Georgia with a delegation of American women. Please meet Dr Roy Medley. He was born in another Georgia - not the real one. He

is the most warm, kind and wise person you could meet. He is the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, and at the same time the President-elect of the National Council of Churches in the USA. This is what his denomination is called - they represent some of the most progressive Baptist churches in the world. They are ecumenical through and through, and fiercely support the cause of social justice and peace all over the world. The martyr of the social rights movement in the USA, Martin Luther King, belonged to Roy's denomination. They are rightly proud of this. Roy came to Georgia in 2004. I think this is a correct date. During his visit we walked a lot. We went to the 6th century monasteries in South East Georgia; we walked in pilgrimage to the 2nd century cave city of Uplistsikhe with a large group of young pilgrims from our cathedral; and on Palm Sunday we walked through the city of Tbilisi to our cathedral (this was the most difficult bit for Roy because he wore a nice pair of black Sunday shoes). He was to leave the next day. As we walked through the city Roy turned to me and said:

"I am leaving tomorrow morning for the States, you know, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. Why do you ask?"

"I hope you are not going to walk me to the airport! I insist we have a car", smiled Roy beautifully. But, despite his charming smile, I could not help noticing a sort of 'wicked' look in his eyes. And I was right. Some time later I received from him a package of white T-shirts with an inscription on the back: 'I have survived Malkhaz'. That was wicked. I thought Roy would never come back to Georgia but this time I was wrong. Last Autumn I received a letter from him saying that he was bringing a delegation of lay and ordained women to Georgia to explore the interfaith experience of our church in Georgia. He had been particularly amazed at the personal friendship we had developed with Muslim friends of ours. Roy asked me to design a programme for his visit under the condition that I should not include in the programme any lengthy walks! So I did not.

Our flight arrived at Tbilisi airport at 4 am on January 18th. I wanted to be there before Stephen and Roy arrived. People in Tbilisi knew that I was arriving that morning but I kept it as a surprise that Ala was arriving with me as well. We were met at the airport by family and friends. Our son Alex was particularly amazed to see his Mum coming into the arrivals hall. His eyes widened and his face went pale. The Tbilisi sky was crystal clear and stars were shining brightly. It was also freezing cold.

We went to our place, which is my parental home. The upper floor where our bedroom is had not been heated during the winter. It is usual practice when you go to bed to undress but we could not do it; we had to put more clothes on before going to bed. Even that did not help. We were too tired to think of hot water bottles. Ala and I hugged each other and tried to warm up. We never went to sleep - it was too cold. By the time we felt warmer it was time to get up for a meeting with the bishops. We spend almost the entire day synchronizing and planning the details for the visit of the two different delegations, with two different agendas. At the end of the day we had finalized both programmes, made numerous telephone calls and agreed arrangements.

"Now, about tomorrow's programme!", said Bishop Ilia.

"What about it?" asked Bishop Rusudan, whom we all tease endlessly for being the first female bishop of our Church. 'The first woman bishop' has almost become a natural part of her title. When she is being introduced by other bishops she is always called 'our woman bishop' as if it was not obvious that she is a woman. We do not say this is our 'man' bishop, do we?

“We have not decided anything about tomorrow’s feast, the Baptism of Jesus, the 19th of January”, said Ilia.

“I think you should preach, people have not heard you preaching for ages”, said Bishop Merab.

“Who will celebrate the eucharist?” I asked them.

“You should!”, said Rusudan.

“How about the baptism? Who will baptise the people?” I asked, because on the feast of the Baptism of Jesus in our liturgy we have the baptism of the people and the renewal of our baptismal vows.

“You will”, said all three bishops, almost in unison.

I accepted their suggestion to celebrate liturgy, to preach and to baptise with certain reservations in my heart. The feast of the Baptism of Jesus was one of the feasts I used to like a lot. I was baptised on that day on January 19th in the river Mtkvary near Mtskheta when I was 17. Georgia was still a part of the Soviet Union where religion was under severe control and scrutiny by the Communist state. I was about to graduate from high school and was very keen on going to university. My baptism and membership of the church could be an insuperable hindrance to going to university. But I felt strongly that I had to make my decision. I went to my parents’ bedroom at 5 am and asked my father to baptise me. He was an ordained minister of the Church. The 19th of January marked the beginning of my journey as a Christian. It used to be like a birthday date. I used to receive cards and letters on January 19th. Not any more. For me this date became the most poignant day in my life. A few years ago, on January 19th my adopted son, Beni, was killed in a freak accident. I lost a son, a confidant and a fiercely loyal friend. The day which I used to celebrate became a day which I will mourn for the rest of my life.

Beni came into my life in his late teens from a very abusive family. He had experienced a lot of pain and suffering. The only light in his life was his mother’s warmth and care. He was a mischievous child but we made a lot of progress together. I taught him literature, history and English. He did some studies abroad, and then entered Tbilisi State University and studied culture and archaeology. I baptised him in the river Aragvi and I married him and his girlfriend Nino in my private chapel; I dedicated their child Nicolas when he was still very young. For Beni I was certainly a fatherly character in his life but his experience with his own father was so painful that he told me: “I cannot call you father, I hate this word.” So he called me ‘mother’ instead.

On January 19th I was returning from Ilkley, in Yorkshire, where I had preached in the parish church of St. Margaret, being invited and warmly hosted by Fr. Philip Gray and his most friendly family. I think it was near Derby when I received a call from the chaplain of Lincoln College, Fr. Gregory Platten, a son of Bishop Stephen Platten.

“Hello Malkhaz”, he said, “Where are you?”

“I am on the train to Oxford and I should be there within a couple of hours. Why are you asking?” I was curious to know.

“Well, Gillian and I would like to see you. We will meet you at the station.” Gillian is Gregory’s wife. She comes from a Scottish Presbyterian background but she is now an ordained priest of the Church of England. Gregory’s call made me little bit nervous. I could not understand why they wanted to see me so urgently. I even thought that something wrong had happened to them. Was his father unwell?

Was it his mother? It never crossed my mind that there could be something wrong with my own family.

I was met at Oxford station by Gregory and Gillian. When I looked at them I realised that I was to hear bad news.

“It’s Beni”, said Gregory with a powerful feeling of sympathy, “He has been killed in an accident.” I was devastated. I collapsed into Gregory’s and Gillian’s arms. I did not want to accept that Beni was gone after all the love and energy I had invested in him. How could I possibly cope with this pain? It’s so unfair and wrong. I went to Georgia to bury my son. I went to his home. He was there in the coffin: tall, handsome like a mediaeval knight. No father should bury his children!

After his death everything changed around me. Everything and everyone looked different. I entered a long period of depression and mourning. I was in Oxford to finish my dissertation. But I could not continue writing my dissertation for several months. The only thing I could do was translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into modern Georgian. The word became my comfort. Before Beni’s death, just a few weeks earlier, I had received my portrait painted by Brother Eric of Taizé. When I opened the carefully wrapped portrait I found it difficult to figure out its significance. I am sat in a black chair in my clerical vestments and three angels are comforting me. One of the angels is handing me a book with two Greek letters on it: Alpha and Omega. After Beni’s death this portrait became very meaningful to me. It is a mystery why Brother Eric painted me that way. Sadly, I could not ask him because this was his last painting - he died after having painted it.

This year, for the first time after Beni’s death, I was to celebrate the liturgy of the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. That was going to be a challenge, but I accepted it. I pulled myself together and celebrated the liturgy in the Peace Cathedral. It went very well. I felt I had got my sacerdotal energy back. I was a little bit tense at the beginning but when I descended into the water to baptise people, and when I consecrated the bread and wine, I felt relieved, as if I was restored and renewed in my spiritual mission.

After the liturgy I went to Beni’s grave. He is buried in a cemetery close to the city centre. Imedo and Sandro, my friends from the cathedral, came with Ala and me. I sat at the grave of my beloved son and spoke to him in silence. Very soon Nino, Beni’s wife and Nikolas, Beni’s five year-old boy joined us at the grave. I embraced both of them as my tears ran down my cheeks and beard. I thought it was not fair to give such a gloomy welcome to little Nikolas and tried to brighten up the atmosphere.

“Nikolas, dear, how have you been?” I asked the boy, who was shyly hiding behind his Mum. He did not answer. He gave a shy look at me instead.

“Answer Bizi (which in Georgian means “uncle”), don’t be shy”, said Nino. But Nikolas stubbornly kept silent.

“That’s all right, Nino. Never mind. The only problem is that I have brought some presents for Nikolas from Santa but apparently Nikolas does not want those presents and I will have to take them back”, I said to provoke Nikolas to speak. And the trick did work.

“That is a lie!” started Nikolas, “I did not say I do not want the presents from Santa.” Then Nikolas paused for a minute and continued pointing a finger in my direction, saying “Watch out, Bizi, if you continue saying lies your beard will grow even longer!”

“If the length of my beard is caused by the lies I have said one might suggest that I have never said a single truth in all my life”, I said.

We all laughed and the atmosphere at the grave changed. Sadness was merged with hope and joy. Nikolas and I entered into long and amusing conversation.

That night we went to meet Bishop Stephen and Charles Reed at the airport. For whatever reason European flights arrive at Tbilisi airport at the most cruel times, between 3 am and 5 am. I could not sleep that night either. We were a little worried about their flights because of the heavy snow in England. But the flight arrived on time. Bishop Stephen wore a large Siberian fur hat which seemed most appropriate for the freezing weather in Georgia. That was Sunday morning. Within a few hours we were to celebrate a liturgy in the Peace Cathedral, where Bishop Stephen is well-known and admired. He gave a very short yet very memorable sermon on his experience in a desert. We celebrated the eucharist in the liturgical tradition of St. John Chrysostom in Georgian and English and left the cathedral well before the benediction for an appointment with the chair of the new parliament.

Dato Usupashvili, the chairman, gave us enough time to cover a lot of areas of interest. He spoke with us openly and candidly about political tension in the country, about the plans of the parliament, and also about issues related to religious liberty.

“For me it is most important that the individual has complete freedom in making his or her decision about faith and religion. This is what I stand for and this is what I would like to safeguard for the people of Georgia”, declared the chairman firmly.

We were very impressed by the meeting. He seems to be a most progressive force in the new Georgian government. He is a very well-balanced and intellectual person. In Georgia, Patriarch Ilia II became a very strong political figure. This is easily explained. The presidents and governments came and went but he remained in power for over 32 years. He has just turned 80. Usupashvili told us that he was asked to offer a jubilee speech on behalf of the new government. I was very surprised to hear from him that in his speech he told the patriarch that he was “dangerously popular”, which pointed to the weakness of state institutions. I thought it was very brave of him to say that. In Georgia there is such an atmosphere that you can criticise everything and everyone, except the Church and the patriarch. One has a feeling that the Orthodox Church filled in the void that was left by Communist ideology. This is obviously not very good for the Church and its future. Such a status for the Church will invite an overwhelming nihilism towards religion in the future.

“I would vote for him if he was British”, said Bishop Stephen.

In the evening we were invited to Avto Guruli’s home. Avto is the director of the Georgian Bible Society and a very good friend of ours. Avto and his wife Elvira prepared a beautiful meal for us. The wine came from Avto’s home region in West Georgia. I have known him for many years and worked with him closely on a variety of projects including Bible translations, distributions and also relief work among the Chechen refugees after the second Russian-Chechnian war. He is a very hard-working fellow and the happiest grandparent in the world.

Next day we had a series of meetings with various political leaders, both from the president’s party and the government party. The president now is the leader of the opposition party. We had meetings with Giga Bokeria of the National Security Council of Georgia, who told us that despite the fact that the opposition won the elections in September, the political orientation of the country to the West will not change, but there will not be the ‘same energy and enthusiasm’ that the previous government

had. He also admitted that after the last elections, for the first time in Georgia's democratic history, a peaceful transition of power has taken place, which is a significant step forward. After having said that he could not hide his political bias and said:

“Sometimes when you step forward, you have to be careful because you might step in shit.”

The meeting with Gigi Ugulava, the Mayor of Tbilisi, was very interesting. Gigi is the elected mayor of the city and will remain in office till the end of 2014. President Saakashvili has seven more months to go. After that, if the new president is not elected from the opposition party, Gigi will remain the only high-ranking politician from Saakashvili's group. Gigi is highly regarded by the citizens of Tbilisi. He has managed to do a lot of work in the city. He has also been the person who has been very attentive to the needs of the poor. Gigi is keen to build relations with London and Bishop Stephen promised him to help him to establish relations with the Lord Mayor of (the city of) London and the Mayor of London (ie. the capital).

In the afternoon Bishop Merab, Ilia and I went to meet the American delegation at the airport. Bishop Rusudan and Goga Gujejiani, a young friend of ours, took care of the British delegation.

“Roy and his girls”, as one of our bishops called the delegation rather wickedly, arrived from Beirut where they had some time learning about Christian Muslim relations in Lebanon. After the orientation talk I left the delegation at Betheli Centre, where they stayed. Bishop Merab and Ilia stayed with them for dinner. I had to leave.

I went for dinner to the home of one of my young friends who grew up ‘in my hands’, as we say in Georgia. His name is Dato Varduashvili. He is in his early twenties. For me he is a beacon of hope for Georgia. Dato was born into a dysfunctional family in a rural village. His father was abusive and he did his best see that his son would not make any progress in life. But Dato did something incredible. He was 16 years old when he decided to take the charge of his life. He borrowed about 100 GBP and went to Azerbaijan to do some business, without knowing any languages spoken in Baku no Azerbaijani and no Russian. He started with buying linen in Azerbaijan and selling it in Georgia. Within a year he managed to make enough money to start business in the cattle trade. He brought calves from Azerbaijan, fattened them for a few months and sold them in Georgia... within two years he was able to buy a flat in Tbilisi, and to pay the fees for his university course, which he did on a part-time basis. Within another few years he restored his parental home in the village, despite his father's objection. He bought another flat, bought a vehicle, and started refurbishing the first flat he had acquired. The secret of his success was and remains his mother's love and support. Dato wanted me to see the flat he had refurbished beautifully, and have a meal with my guests and friends from the church.

The meal at Dato's place was wonderful. Both Dato and his Mum cooked numerous eastern Georgian dishes for us. There is no Georgian ‘supra’ (the table feast) without a toast master. I was asked to do the job, which I happily accepted. Originally Georgians drank three toasts; one for God, one for the King, and one for the homeland. But in the course of history we made incredible progress and the number of toasts grew from three to 23 plus. The key is that you do not have to drink the glass to the bottom unless the toast master says the magic word ‘bolomde’ (to the bottom) and then you have to empty the glass. If you do not know the rules of the Georgian supra you might find yourself drunk at the third or fourth glass.

We drank for Dato, his Mum and also for his Dad, even though he has never been supportive of him, and remains rather jealous of the progress his son has made. Toasting is a very good way to engage everybody in a meaningful conversation around the table.

“We cannot have such a lovely time here without singing a song or two”, somebody suggested. Bishop Stephen liked the idea. He looked at Dr. Reed and said:

“If you sing one Georgian song we will match it with an English one.” That was a fair pact, I thought.

The ‘first woman bishop’, Rusudan, and I had performed some traditional Georgian songs for a number of years, so it was not a big deal to sing. We decided to sing ‘Chrelo Pepela’. This is a lovely table song, but its lyric is rather silly. Let me try to translate it.

“O stripped butterfly please fly gently,

Delia ranuni, dalia ranuni, delia ranuni. (These words do not mean anything in Georgian, they are like la-la-la).

Do not fly in do not fly out.

Delia ranuni, dalia ranuni, delia ranuni.

You will be rained on and you will be soaked.

Delia ranuni, dalia ranuni, delia ranuni.”

Everybody knows this song in Georgia. Or they did when I lived there. The tune for the music is cheerful and easily memorable.

“Now it’s your turn, my Lord Bishop.” I turned to Stephen, who was sitting next to me. The bishop thought for a second or two and looked at Charles to make sure that he would join in. Much to everybody’s amazement the bishop had sung the Georgian song. I am glad I do not have to translate it into English. It was the ‘Hippopotamus song’, which anybody can guess is not a song from Mediaeval English from folklore (and which was much sillier than ours!).

The bishop sang the solo:

“A bold Hippopotamus was standing one day

On the banks of the cool Shalimar

He gazed at the bottom as it peacefully lay

By the light of the evening star.

Away on a hilltop, sat combing her hair

Was a fair Hippopotami maid;

The Hippopotamus was no ignoramus

And sang her this sweet serenade.”

After having sung the first verse solo the Bishop led Charles me and all of us into singing a chorus:

“Mud, mud, glorious mud

Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood!

So follow me, follow,

Down to the hollow,

And there let us wallow

in glorious mud.”

We went on and on happily singing ‘Mud, mud, glorious mud’, as the bishop introduced other verses of the song.

“Is it a Christian song?” asked Dato’s mother, who does not speak any English.

“Very!” somebody joked at the table.

“Well, strictly speaking, it is not exactly a religious song but anything that can warm up the human heart and make it happy can be considered as spiritual and religious.” I started philosophising, but soon realized that it was not appropriate. We had to go home and get ready for another day which was going to be rather demanding. The American delegation would start in the early morning to go to Batumi and the British delegation would join them in Batumi after having a couple of meetings with Georgian and British Embassy officials. It was decided Bishops Merab and Ilia would escort the Americans and I would escort the British.

The journey to Batumi was long. It took us about five hours. But it did not take as long as it used to be before the motorway was constructed and roads re-done. I can remember that in the early 1990s it took almost twelve (?) hours to get to Batumi. Why did we have to go to Batumi? There were two reasons.

Batumi is the capital city of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara. This part of Georgia used to be a part of the Ottoman Empire for three hundred years, and the majority of the population adopted the Muslim faith. Since the independence of Georgia the Muslims in the republic have experienced the imposition of the Orthodox Christian faith. Social and religious coercion have been used for the mission among Muslims. Reportedly churches and theological seminaries have been built in the villages and towns where there were no Orthodox Christians. Those who convert to Orthodox Christianity can count on various social and political benefits. The Prime Minister of the country, Zurab Zhvania, encouraged and attended mass baptisms organized by the local Orthodox clergy. Understandably this created tension between the Orthodox and Muslim populations of the country. Recently Ajarian eco-migrants were forbidden to pray together on Fridays in a house set aside for worship.

“We are Christians, and we do not want Muslims to worship in our village”, shouted a woman in video footage on the confrontation between the two communities.

“We have children to bring up in this village!” shouted another woman, as if the well-being of the children would be threatened if Muslims prayed in their prayer house on Friday!

We wanted to meet the Muslim leaders in the region and find out what was going on there.

It was late afternoon when we arrived in Batumi. The city is located in a bay in the foot hills of beautiful mountains. When we drew nearer to the city I could not recognize its skyline. So much has been done since I saw it in 2006. Saakashvili's government invested a lot of energy and resources in the city. It looks like a little Las Vegas - lots of new hotels, skyscrapers, casinos and restaurants. Reportedly the city attracts a lot of tourists from Caucasian countries, Azerbaijan and Armenia, Europe, Turkey, Iran, and even Israel.

All of us were welcomed by the Georgian Muslim Union leadership in front of the Radisson Hotel. But we did not stay at the hotel. We decided to express Christian solidarity with the Muslims of Ajara by staying in their homes. After dinner we were invited to the mosque, where we were warmly welcomed again. A short welcome speech was given from the 'mihrab' - a semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the qibla, that is, the direction of the Kaaba - by the chairman of the Muslim Union, Zurab Tsetskhladze. He used to be the Mufti of Ajara but decided to resign the post and devote his life to religious education. At the end of the meeting all of us - two British, twelve American and nine Georgian Christians - were kindly invited to offer prayers in accordance with our tradition. I suggested the Christians spend some time in silent meditation and then asked Stephen and Roy to offer short prayers. We all sat quietly in the mosque and prayed for the healing of the wounds of history, for peace and for reconciliation.

After prayer in the courtyard of the mosque we were met by a group of Muslim hosts who took the Christian guests to their homes two by two. One elderly man was particularly keen to invite Roy Medley to his place, but Roy had already been assigned to another family.

Stephen, Charles and I were invited to Zurab Tsetskhladze's place. We were warmly welcomed by two children, Rashid and Rishad, who were in their early teens. A little table was laid with traditional Ajarian sweets and dry fruit. We had a long and lovely conversation over a cup of tea. As we discovered, Zurab was educated in Istanbul, Turkey. He came back to Batumi to become the Mufti of Ajara but then decided that it would be better to give all his energy to the education of the people. The Georgian Muslim Union headquarters is a place for learning and education. The place is very small but they manage to have seminars for different levels of Muslim society every day. He also told us that in Batumi, a city of 150,000 people, there is only one mosque, which is not enough for the number of faithful who need to carry out their religious duty by praying on Fridays in a mosque. We learned that the authorities will not allow them to build another mosque, while the Orthodox Church has built a couple of dozen churches in the city, and a number of properties have been given to it free of charge. Understandably Muslims feel discriminated against unfairly, and their religious feelings are hurt by Christians. With the direction of the Orthodox Church, crosses are being erected at virtually every street corner in the city to tell Muslims that this is not their city. During the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 Georgian Muslims fought bravely for the freedom of Georgia. A lot of them fell on the battlefield. The Muslims of Ajara were particularly hurt when the authorities erected crosses on the graves of the dead Muslim soldiers. The Orthodox Church made the Georgian Muslims hate the cross. I was sitting there in the home of a leader of the Muslim community in Georgia, and translating the sad narratives of religious oppression and humiliation of Muslims by Christians. I felt sick with embarrassment.

"Poor Jesus", I thought, "we failed to understand his gospel of non-violence and acceptance! What we hear seems so similar to mediaeval suppression, yet it is happening here and now."

Bishop Stephen and Charles also looked sad to hear all the stories of religious coercion and oppression. John Locke, a famous Oxford man and thinker wrote as early as in the 17th century that lack of religious toleration can be unchristian, citing the example of the Prince of Peace, Jesus, who did not resort to violence and coercion against those who did not follow him. According to him, “if the gospel and the apostles may be believed, no man can be a Christian without charity, and without that faith which works, not by force, but by love.” Following Locke’s logic we can see the structure of his argument: no-one can be a Christian unless they are charitable. Religious persecutors are not charitable, therefore religious persecutors are not true Christians. Locke hinted strongly at the hypocrisy of religious persecutors: they do not practice what they preach. Obviously, what Locke said of Christians, the same is applicable to any religion, because any religion by its nature is meant to help people to live in peace and harmony with fellow human beings. Sadly, we still need to learn how to live peacefully, not only in Ajara but everywhere.

In the conversation with Zurab all three of us were amazed at his progressive ideas. He seemed to be more pro-Western than any Christian clergymen I have ever met in Georgia.

“Do you mind that the city of Batumi has become like a little Las Vegas, with a lots of casinos and other establishments that may not be acceptable to your faith?” asked Charles in the conversation with Zurab.

“I do not think that banning things is helpful. The casinos here are full of people from Muslim countries where gambling is strictly forbidden. Coercion never works. Human beings should be granted freedom”, answered Zurab. All of us were surprised by his answer. You do not expect such a reply from a Muslim cleric.

Zurab lives in a relatively small but well-taken-care-of flat. It was very generous of him to invite us to his place. It was rather late when we decided to go to bed.

“The Bishop and Charles will sleep in this room, right next to the sitting room”. said Zurab in a rather serious voice. “You are one of us and therefore I will ask you to sleep on the sofa.” I was very happy to sleep on the sofa. The room was warm and nice but when I told Stephen and Charles about the host’s decision about our sleeping arrangements, Charles protested vigorously.

“By no means. The bishop and archbishop should sleep in the room and I will sleep on the sofa! You have a very difficult day tomorrow you need to be refreshed and fit for it.”

“No, Charles, I will be happy in the sitting room. I am an archaeologist by trade and I am used to sleeping anywhere.” I tried to convince Charles to sleep in the room with the bishop.

“No, no, no! I am sleeping here on the sofa.” Charles seemed incredibly firm in his decision. I had to comply.

“He is such a kind person, I thought out loud, but my belief in Charles’s ‘kindness’ was about to be shaken.

“Which bed would you like to sleep in?” asked Stephen.

“Does not matter, you chose,” I said. Stephen chose the bed next to the window and I chose the one next to the wall which separated us from the sitting room. Stephen and I dived into our beds and continued our conversation about the day’s experience. Suddenly Charles looked into our room and asked if we would not mind closing the door that separated our room from the sitting room. That was

the minute I started to doubt Charles's kindness about the sofa. Why would he ask to close the door!? Within a few minutes the bishop went to sleep and only then I realised why Charles was so kind to let the holy men sleep in the same room. After all those previous sleepless nights I was preparing to sleep tight, when the bishop's snoring started shaking not only our room but the entire block of flats!

"Charles, I am going to kill you tomorrow for your sanctimonious cheating!" I thought angrily.

"Did I snore?" asked the bishop next morning. I was prepared to say 'no' out of politeness but Charles volunteered to answer instead of me.

"Did you snore?! The door between your room and mine was opening and closing at your snoring!" said Charles.

"Well done, Charles", I thought, "I will take this as your confession and happily grant you my absolution."

After breakfast, we had another meeting with the Mufti of Ajara in the mosque. The Mufti and I sat in the 'mihrab' and others sat on our right and left, making a rather blurred circle. The Mufti of Ajara is also a sheikh of the All Georgian Council of Muslims. His name is Jemal Paksadze, a relatively young and quietly-spoken cleric. He welcomed us warmly and sincerely thanked us for the visit. This was the first time they had hosted such a large Christian group in their premises.

"I need to take the advantage to thank the Georgian Baptists for their support", said the Mufti calmly, and looked at the international guests in the circle. "Bishop Rusudan was the only Christian leader in this country who raised her voice against discrimination against Muslims in Georgia." He paused, and then continued: "Bishop Rusudan was the only person in Georgia who has publicly maintained that it is insulting to erect crosses on the graves of the Muslim soldiers who fought for the independence of Georgia."

To be perfectly honest I was very pleased to hear these words from the leader of the Muslim community in Georgia. Bishop Rusudan's support made the Georgian Muslims think that coercion and religious intolerance is not acceptable to all Christians. Bishop Rusudan had spoken for the Christian gospel.

After the meeting the Mufti took me aside and said:

"I can well remember your visits to Batumi when I served under the previous Mufti. We are grateful to your church and your people. But we also need you here in this country. Your presence is greatly missed."

It was very moving to hear this from the Mufti whom I did not know that well at all. The deputy chairman, Taniel Nakaidze of the Muslim Union, also told me that they were inspired by my sermon given at the MECO Mosque in Oxford.

"We are translating your Khutba into Georgian and before we publish it we would like you to read and correct the translation if needed". Nakaidze told me before we left for Tbilisi.

Being inspired by the meeting with the Mufti we went on to meet the political leader of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara. By that time we knew what we should talk to him about. We knew that we, as Georgian, British and American Christians, had to speak in one voice in support of the Muslim cause.

The chairman is young and inexperienced. He was taken aback to see such a large international delegation being accompanied by Christian and Muslim clergy. He had realised that we would be addressing the issues of religion liberty and discrimination against Muslims. Therefore he started what Bishop Stephen later called 'rhubarbing' - telling lovely stories about traditional religious tolerance.

"I am Orthodox myself, but my parents and my grandparents were Muslims. I am very respectful of the Muslim faith and will not allow any discrimination against them." That was also a kind of 'rhubarbing'. Stephen realised that the encounter could go into a meaningless conversation and therefore intervened.

"We are very grateful to you for welcoming all of us here and for explaining the religious situation in the region. But if you do not mind we have a question," said Stephen.

"I am happy to answer any questions", replied the chairman.

"This is our question: why do the Muslims of Batumi not have adequate facilities for worship?" said Stephen, and looked at the chairman's translator. And then something very strange started to happen. The translator would not translate accurately what the bishop asked. Obviously Stephen could not know what the translator said. We were sitting around a huge round table, more than twenty people. The chairman was sitting in the centre, I was sitting on his right and Stephen was sitting on his left. Stephen and I could see each other but we could not talk. I realised that we were losing a chance to address the main issue. I snatched a piece of paper from Zurab Tsatskhelidze's hands, wrote a message for Stephen and passed it on to my right with the hope that it would reach Stephen. My note was very short: "Stephen your question about 'adequate facilities' has not been translated." The note on the piece of paper travelled around the table and finally arrived at the bishop. Stephen read the message and repeated his question. Surprisingly the interpreter would not translate the question. I shook my head in disbelief. Stephen immediately realised that he was not translated again and said:

"I would like to ask Archbishop Malkhaz to formulate the question on behalf of all of us", said Stephen and turned to me. That was my chance to address the issues of Georgian Muslims and formulate our concern. The chairman did not like the question and switched to a defensive mood.

"I am not giving plots of lands to any religious groups until March. I am new and inexperienced in this position and will have a look at the needs of the Muslim community after we have developed our concept of the city architecture." Both Stephen and Roy immediately supported the chairman with his decision to pay necessary attention to the needs of Muslim faithful.

"Perhaps when I come back to Batumi you will have a new mosque", said the bishop. It is one thing when the Muslims of Turkey and other countries ask about the place of worship for Muslims in Batumi, but it is politically far more important when Christians, Anglicans and Baptists, are mediating for religious needs of the Muslim community.

"Perhaps the Lord Bishop should promise to come to Batumi for the opening of the new mosque in Batumi!" I exclaimed. All laughed. The visit was attended by two local TV journalists. Next morning there were headlines in the press: "Baptists demand a plot of land for a mosque!" People kept asking why on earth Baptists would need to build a mosque?!

After the meeting with the chairman the American delegation stayed in Batumi to have a meeting with Muslim women. A few days later Roy wrote to me:

“The experience we had in Georgia was a perspective-changing event for our group. The night in Batumi with Muslim hosts was especially meaningful.” In Biblical tradition Abraham, whom we all consider as the founder of our monotheistic tradition welcomed three strangers by the oaks of Mamre, near the place where he is buried now, in Hebron. Abrahamic hospitality and acceptance of each other is the foundation for the future of Muslim - Christian relations.

In Batumi it was the first time for the most of Christians to be hosted by Muslims and Most Muslims to host Christians. Such encounters can change attitude and prejudices at the grassroots. A highly intellectual French theologian, Louis Massignon started to see Christianity and Islam as a single spiritual family owing to Muslim hospitality he had experienced. He was nursed and looked after when his life was endangered by a serious illness. Perhaps the best remedy for all our diseases of prejudice, sense of superiority, intolerance, hate and ignorance, is hospitality. Tolerance is not enough to get rid of prejudices. Mutual hospitality and humility brought together should be enough.

Stephen, Charles and I left for Tbilisi. That night we had to see off the British delegation. By that time I was very sleepy, as sleepless nights were catching up with me. As soon as we started from Batumi Stephen and Charles got engaged in a rather hot discussion on Church of England policies. I sat in the back of the car and decided to have a nap while they were engaged in conversation, but it did not work. From time to time, in the midst of the conversation, the bishop would turn to me and ask somewhat banal questions.

“My Lord Archbishop, what is the distance between the Black and the Caspian Seas?”; or “What is the population of Kutaisi?” Then there was a long interval and I thought the bishop would not ask any questions. I went to sleep. I even started dreaming of something. In the midst of the dream I clearly heard the voice “Malkhaz, how many archbishops have you known?” No, that was not a dream, that was Bishop Stephen again.

“Which archbishops?” I asked naively.

“Archbishops of Canterbury”, clarified the bishop.

“Let me think. I knew Donald Coggan, Robert Runcie, George Carey and Rowan Williams.” I slowly remembered all the names and also the settings where I had met them.

“You would have been very young when you met Archbishop Coggan.” Stephen could not hide his amazement.

“No, I was not very young when I met him. Coggan was very old.” With this our conversation ended and I continued dozing. We were near Gori when I received a telephone call saying President Saakashvili had arrived from Strassburg and if we wanted we could see him at 10 pm.

At 10 pm we were at the President’s office. We were received at 10.15 pm. The President looked rather relaxed, he did not seem to be terribly tired after his European journey. He immediately offered us some tea and invited us to seat in large white leather couches. He thanked Stephen for his support of Georgia and everything he had done for our country. Bishop Stephen has certainly been one of the most committed friends of Georgia as well as of Baptist and Orthodox churches in Georgia.

We had a very meaningful conversation. The President looked very sad and I felt very sorry for him.

“Before the elections I thought I would leave political life but now I have decided to stay in politics”, he said.

After the conversation Stephen offered Saakashvili his gift, which was nicely wrapped and tied up with a ribbon.

“What is it?” asked Saakashvili.

“It’s the cufflinks of the House of Lords,” said Stephen.

“Cufflinks are always useful, Thank you!” said Saakashvili, and immediately ventured to open the little box with a child’s enthusiasm.

“One cufflink says ‘Content’ and another ‘Not Content’,” explained the bishop.

“They are very nice”, said the President.

Before the photographer came to take pictures I had a brief chat with the President.

“Why have you abandoned us?” asked the President in a kind of offended tone.

“I have not abandoned you. I went to Oxford to finish my dissertation. I will be back soon.” I was very surprised to find out that Saakashvili knew where I was and what I was doing.

Would my presence in the country make any difference for his government? If I had offered critical solidarity to the government in a more robust way, would it have made any difference? I suppose I will have to live with these questions and doubts. I had been critical of his government’s policy on the militarization of the country, and the lack of care for the social needs of the people. But perhaps I could have done more. Saakashvili has achieved a lot. When he became the president Georgia was a failed country. Corruption was overwhelmingly everywhere in the police, the army, education, and health care. He and his government brought about dramatic changes in the country. Georgia became the least corrupt country in Europe! He achieved it with his daring decisions. For instance, he fired 70, 000 policemen in one day. The police used to be the most corrupt institution in the country. He has also made a lot of mistakes, which caused the downfall of his party at the election last year. He might be considered as a lame duck by his opponents, but I think he will be back in power. He is very young. He has just turned 45. At the end of the meeting Saakashvili asked us to pass his greetings to Bishop Richard Harries, Baron Harries of Pentregarth who visited Georgia last June and on his 76th birthday had a meeting with President Saakashvili. Richard is also a very good friend of ours. During his visit to Georgia we con-celebrated the first eucharist with the historic chalice which had just been returned to our Cathedral.

At the meeting with Saakashvili I felt embarrassed. I had nothing to give to the President. I should have thought about it. Stephen was more prepared. But the President was well prepared. We received lovely presents: a bottle of red wine, various books on life in Georgia and an apple i-pad with an engraving of a picture of the Georgian President’s Palace on its silver back. I think I should keep it.

The same night we went to the airport to see Stephen and Charles off. Their visit was a success. Both were very happy with their achievements. After having seen them off, I went home to have some sleep. I was in bed at 6.30 am.

I was awoken by some voices. Sometimes when I travel and wherever I wake up I do not immediately realise where I am. That morning the same happened to me again. When I awoke for a few seconds I could not tell where I was. It was still dark but it was starting to get lighter. At my bedside I saw silhouette of two warmly-dressed children.

“Where on earth am I and who are these two children? Am I dreaming again or what?” I thought to myself.

“Who are you?” I asked them with a certain hesitation.

“We are Tata and Nita”, they answered. These were my niece’s children who had grown immensely since I last saw them.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as politely as I could.

“Well, we came to invite you to our sister’s birthday tonight. Will you come?”

“Did your Mum ask you to invite guests?” I asked.

“No, she did not. We want to invite you to the party!”

The encounter with these little girls made me very sad. They are so bright, so artistic and articulate. But their future is overshadowed by their father’s addiction. Before the Rose Revolution Georgia, was a transit country for drug-dealers. A great variety of drugs were transported from Central Asia and Afghanistan through Georgia to Europe. Saakashvili’s government cut that trade link. The laws regarding drug use and dealing were toughened. The ordinary drugs became scarce and dangerous to possess. The little girls’ father, like many others, switched to a home-made drug which is called “crocodile.” It is made of petrol and it takes two hours to administer. The girls’ father cannot give up the drugs. He was jailed for two years but it did not help. His family tried to help him by sending him for rehabilitation, but it did not work either. He is engaged in slow suicide, and it is only a matter of time before the girls lose their father, whom they love dearly. In the meantime he does not work and cannot support his family. A very sad story.

I could not go back to sleep. In the afternoon I joined the American delegation and gave them a guided tour of the old capital of Georgia. We went to Jvari Monastery, which proudly looks over the ancient city. On our way to the old capital I had a lengthy conversation with one of the leaders of the American delegation, Virginia Holmstrom. We agreed that next year she will bring a group of pilgrims to Georgia.

Then we went to the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral and explored the cradle of Georgian Christianity. In the evening we went to Natarkhtari village where I usually go after a Saturday’s hiking. One of the ladies volunteered to learn Georgian toastmistressing. She mastered the toastmaster’s skills beautifully.

“I think she is a Georgian in disguise”, said somebody at the Table.

Next morning we had the eucharist at my private chapel. American and Georgian friends joined us at my home. Bishop Rusudan celebrated the eucharist for us. After the liturgy we had lengthy discussions with our American and Georgian friends about the life and politics of Georgia, and about the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. The American guests were particularly interested in the ecclesiology of our Church, and the three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons. Most of the Baptists in the world have either two-fold or single ministries.

It was lovely to sit at the open fire place with friends and colleagues and discuss the future. Soon I had to leave the guests and finish off packing. Ala and I left for England within an hour. On the plane I was thinking of what we had seen and heard in Georgia. During our visit Charles made an observation which I was particularly glad to hear. After having observed how our bishops interacted with others

and with each other he said that he could not think of another situation where bishops worked so closely and harmoniously together. That made me extremely happy. I hope when I go back I can re-join our bishops and clergy and work together for justice, peace and reconciliation for all the peoples and faiths in Georgia.

Do you think I have written too much? You will be glad to know that I could have written three times as much, but it would have been too cruel both to my editor, Bishop Michael Cleaves, and to you. I should also thank Kyrion for sponsoring my trip to Georgia.

Malkhaz Songulashvili
Oxford, 28 January 2013

Website Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia: http://ebcgeorgia.org/Neue_Dateien/start.html
Sleepless in Georgia is geplaatst op internet vanuit de website Georgica: <http://home.unet.nl/georgica/>
Zie Menu en klik op: Een koude winter.