

## **Canon Andrew White, vicar of the Anglican church of St George, Baghdad, Iraq.**

**22nd January 2012**

Andrew White was born in 1964 to a strict Baptist family and as a child declared he would be an anaesthetist and priest.

He trained at St Thomas' hospital, London as an operating theatre technician specialising in anaesthetics and later leading the crash team (cardiac arrest response).

He worshipped at St Mark's Kennington and had a leading role in the hospital Christian Union.

One day whilst on a meal break, looking across the river to Big Ben, he was praying to God and thanking him for the job he loved when he suddenly, unexpectedly had a strong sense of God saying – now is the time to offer yourself in service to the church.

Andrew White was accepted for training at Ridley Hall, Cambridge and ordained in 1990.

During his studies at Cambridge a dispute arose between the Christian Union and the Jewish society and he was asked to mediate. He learned that the only hope of a resolution and reconciliation was for both sides to listen to each other and try to understand each other's viewpoint.

He formed the Cambridge University Jews and Christian society which eventually became the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). Andrew White was seconded to Jerusalem to study Judaism working in the holidays at St Thomas' hospital. At the Hebrew University he met and befriended people who later in his mediation work in Palestine and Israel would help and guide him. One person who influenced him was former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Donald Coggan who said 'Don't take care, take risks'.

During his time as a curate at St Mark's Battersea 3 significant events occurred.

1 He became unwell, with loss of balance and double vision and was eventually diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1998.

2 He met Caroline who became his wife and by whom he has two sons.

3 He became more involved in inter-religious affairs and the local council issues winning a seat on Wandsworth council.

Looking back he could see God's hand in preparing him for his future role as special envoy to the middle East for the Archbishop of Canterbury, and then in Iraq in mediation and reconciliation. He says he is the only sibling with olive skin and dark hair (his Grandfather was Anglo Indian) and this enabled him to blend in and move around the East where a fair skin, light haired person would immediately be a target as an 'American'.

His next move was to Coventry Cathedral as Director of International Ministry centre for reconciliation. He began travelling more often to the middle East and realised he needed to understand the 3 monotheistic Faiths, Christian, Judaism and Islam, in order to see more clearly the obstacles to peace.

There were 4 things he learned about brokering peace;

1 -**Relationships** had to be made and sustained

2 -**Relief** for people suffering in war zones, food, medicine and shelter

3 -He would have to take **risks**.

4 -Finally **reconciliation** may be possible.

Working at making good, influential relationships means contacting leading clerics, sheikhs and politicians. Often it means being with people who are responsible for terror and torture. Andrew White says he prays to God to help him love these people remembering Jesus told us to love our enemies.

Building these relationships has been vital in many hostage and other mediation situations. In order to begin negotiations when there is a kidnap it is essential to know who can help and who knows the kidnappers. It is

no use talking to one side only.

By 2002 Andrew White was focusing more on Iraq and asked God to show him how to relieve the suffering of the people. With the International Centre for reconciliation he raised funds to set up the first bone marrow transplant unit for Iraqis with leukaemia .

In 2005 he left Coventry Cathedral to be vicar in Baghdad.

Now he experienced faith under fire but most of all, love. His church has been seriously damaged by bombs and rockets. He has soldiers and 35 security people around him, he wears body armour to church as it is outside the green zone. He has seen many of his congregation killed and kidnapped. The children suffer terrible loss, injury and devastation. He sometimes has to leave because of threats to his life. He has been kidnapped. However he knows that most people in Iraq have no choice but to stay. Rich and powerful have left. The poor have to stay. This life can only be endured with love. He and his congregation love the Lord and each other. He says 'we knew that Jesus was all we needed when Jesus was all we had left'.

An example of love comes from meetings he had with Sheikh Talel Sidr , a founder member of Hamas and committed to the destruction of Israel. Andrew White prayed to God to help him love this man. The sheikh left Hamas and became a proponent for peace, saying it was the love he was shown helped him ' pull up thorns and plant flowers'.

His congregation and the people around have great needs, medicine, food and shelter. 96 were killed in 2010. Canon Andrew White travels to America preaching in churches and talking to groups to raise the \$175,000 he needs each month. There is not any welfare money to help those made homeless by bombs, children orphaned and mothers unable to medical bills. Each week the money he raises helps pay rent of many people, and groceries for members of the congregation. He has raised money to build a medical and dental clinic in the church compound that gives care, free to 100 people a day of all faiths. There is also money needed to pay hospital bills following bomb and bullet injuries. Andrew has great trust in prayer and the Holy Spirit to provide.

In his books, 'Vicar of Baghdad' and 'Faith under Fire' Andrew White talks about his losses in personal freedom and only seeing his family once a month as it is unsafe for them to travel to Iraq. However his books are full of the love of God and examples of this love in action amidst terror and destruction. He and his congregation know their Bible. God's word sustains them and the worship is joyful. St George's people, pray together, worship and sing together but also grieve and cry together. They are in church every Friday and Sunday and all festival and Holy Days. Andrew says they are not nominal Christians as is seen sometimes in the West.

What a challenge to me. The love and hope Andrew has in God, his commitment to showing and sharing God's love, his prayerfulness are inspirational but mostly his relationship with God and his fellow 'man' and his unselfish Christian action show me true discipleship.

He quotes from St Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 8 v 28

' We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'.