

The most dangerous place to be a Christian

Last summer, Jeremy Bishop, the Rector of Carlton Colville, joined a group of supporters of Open Doors on a trip to North Korea; here he recounts his experience.

It was the morning after the Football World Cup Final: “Mr Park it is a glorious morning. Do you know the result of the World Cup Final?” “No. I was hoping you would know!” “I don’t know. I was hoping you would know”.

North Korea is often described as “remote”. It isn’t. Look at a map and you will see that North Korea is in the middle of an economically strong region. What North Korea is, though, is isolated. The rulers of the country have cut it off. Divided families on either side of the De-Militarised Zone (DMZ) cannot make a telephone call, send a letter, or visit each other. There is no internet. Mobile phones only work domestically. TV is tightly controlled. So isolated that we did not know whether Germany or Argentina had won.

Like all foreign visitors we were accompanied everywhere by official guides. As we travelled around we were able to pray for God’s blessing on the country.

North Korea is a thoroughly atheist country. When the Korean Worker’s Party, led by Kim Il Sung, came to power with Soviet backing in 1945, Pyongyang, was known as “The Jerusalem of the East”.

The 61-year-old church had come through persecution by Japanese Colonial rulers. The storm soon broke. By the late 1950s the visible church was wiped away. It went underground and faith went secret. North Korea is now the worst country in the world to be a Christian.

“People caught practising Christianity are subject to severe punishments in violation of the right to freedom of religion, ‘disappeared’ without trial to political prison camps (*kwanliso*). The unspeakable atrocities that are being committed against inmates resemble the horrors of camps that totalitarian States established during the twentieth century” (*UN Report, February 2014*).

One our most surprising experiences was in the middle of the 4km wide DMZ. There, huts straddle the front line between north and south that runs down the middle of a conference table. Watched by our guides, and guarded by an officer and soldiers of the Korean People’s Army, we prayed for this country that the world alternately fears and mocks, and for the peaceful re-unification of the Korean people.



North Korea demonstrates that atheism can do nothing to feed some of the deepest longings of the human heart. Having created a spiritual vacuum, a religious cult has arisen to fill it! All across North Korea are statues and images of Kim Il Sung, and his son Kim Jong Il, both dead. The statues have become idols for worship. We visited the largest, in Pyongyang. People are normally expected to offer flowers and bow to the statues. We were able to enter the sacred space, as long as we kept our distance. Towers and slogans across the country proclaim the two Kims to be eternal.

Islamist violence in Paris brings millions onto the streets. In contrast the evils of the *kwanliso* are ignored. But the Lord is calling out a rising tide of prayer from around the world for this isolated country that He loves.

For more information and resources:
www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/north_korea.php

