



Malvern Mashal 16

Under the Tuscan Sun



We have known for years that Ros's uncle owned a house in the heart of Italy, but it had never occurred to us before to ask whether we might be able to go and stay there ourselves. This year, for the first time, it lit up for us – and we had a truly amazing time! Nearly a full week away from our usual responsibilities, a genuine sense of retreat, some ‘pilgrim’ tourism and some lovely new acquaintances – what more could we have asked for?

The hamlet we were staying in lies on the boundary between Tuscany and Umbria. The resident population of just 45 people swells to nearly 300 in the summer, as people flock to the country from the unbearable heat in Rome and Florence. The residents swept us up and made us really welcome. We couldn't believe how well disposed they were to us.

We made friends with a family who have just bought a house in the village, and spent much of the first few days with them. We felt at times as though we were living on a cinema set. The characters around the meal tables (over twenty of us at one meal!) were so perfectly contrasted, a script writer could hardly have chosen them for more dramatic effect. They wanted to talk about serious things, too, which was great. My Italian seemed to improve rather miraculously whenever I found myself caught up in deeper philosophical and spiritual conversations.

The Lord had prepared me for this in a rather special way. Just over a week before going to Italy, I popped into the local Christian book shop to ask if they could get hold of an Italian dictionary for me. The woman who was serving happened to be reading *The Still Small Voice*. Anyway, I suggested to the lady that if she turned the cover over she would recognise the photograph of the person she was speaking to! She replied that they don't order secular books as a rule, but that she personally happened to publish Italian GCSE language learning books! I love it when the Lord shows His concern in such practical ways! Within the hour three such books had landed through our letter box. They proved to be a great help.

I don't know if you have seen the film *'In the Shadow of the Sun?'* It is set in Tuscany and is about a young editor who sets out to woo an old American writer (who has become a recluse) out of the writer's block he has been suffering from for years. (Another film set in this locality, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, focuses on the true story of another writer who was suffering from the same incapacitating complaint). Well, I am certainly not been suffering from anything approaching a shortage of ideas to write about. The Lord was dropping in seeds for long term projects nineteen to the dozen, and returned home with numerous books to read!

I greatly enjoyed reading up on the history of Italy during the Second World War, too, together with the extraordinarily costly Allied advance through the country in 1943, a period about which I knew very little. The Italian campaign cost far more Allied lives than the Normandy ones.

Although so small, the village we were staying in had no fewer than *three* churches. Two of them were more or less permanently open, and we found them extremely conducive places to pray in.

Being so early in the season, Assisi felt 'spiritual' rather than commercialised. The next day, I headed north to the beautiful city of Siena, which I had particularly wanted to visit. I left Ros luxuriating in the extremely rare and necessary state of being able to go entirely at her own pace, slipping gently from reading to prayer to eating to sun balcony, with no outside calls whatsoever on her time.

A dear friend came to stay in Malvern for most of the time while we were away to help Tim look after Dominic. We are so grateful to her. Realistically, Dom would have been highly bored by the very things that blessed us most! The weather hovered around the 35 degree mark from lunchtime until something like 7 o'clock. (The Italians themselves were finding this *too* hot. Florence even touched 40 degrees). One does sympathise with the Roman soldier who found himself posted on Hadrian's wall, and who wrote back home on the equivalent on a two thousand years old post card asking his family to send him more warm socks!



Praying for Italy

Italy is one of the few western European nations that I have never ministered in, but coming here certainly stirred our desire to pray for it. We loved the relaxed atmosphere, and the friendliness of the people, but we were by no means unaware of the 'other' side to it. To say the least, it is not healthy when one man not only runs the country but also controls 90% of the television channels, and an almost equal percentage of the publication media.

For those who would like to get to grips with Berlusconi's Italy I would strongly recommend Tobias Jones' book *The Dark Heart of Italy* (Faber and Faber). It makes for compelling read-

ing, cataloguing and explaining the extraordinary complexities of the corruption that is so endemic in the country. English readers may initially feel disbelief when confronted by some of the examples, but seasoned Italians would reply that if anything the problems are understated.

Tobias is a lecturer at Parma University, and, with the wisdom of five further years in which to reflect on the paradoxes and contradictions of the country, has brought out a revised edition of the book. His concluding chapter is a particularly fine one – and provides some welcome relief from the detailed exposition of the nation's corruption – which come across with something of the power and punch of a minor prophet's denunciation.

It is important to stress that this pessimism is widely echoed by many Italians. They are intensely weighed down by the depth of corruption, and sometimes refer to their country by the dismissive and disparaging term '*L'Italietta*.' As one person explained to me, no progress is possible in many careers unless they have a 'padrone'. Jobs in so many professions are given either along family lines, or in return for certain specific 'favours.' (We will leave that to your imagination, but, to say the least, it does not encourage holy living!) They feel the country is so far gone and so deeply compromised that they can see no way forward.

From our admittedly very limited understanding it is obvious that there is an enormous gap between the glorious emblems of Italy's spiritually rich past (there are so *many* beautiful frescoes and wonderful Renaissance buildings), and the cultural desert that it has now become.

What it will take to bring about a true and lasting move of the Holy Spirit in this land? Well, we are only beginners in the subject so we would be interested to hear from people who have had more experience. We met a few people in Assisi who clearly shone with the love of the Lord, and we hear that there is life in Catholic charismatic circles. But we also saw the all too familiar signs of ageing church congregations and increasing consumerism.

So often in the past in Italy the Lord has raised up individuals who have served as exemplary examples for their period, and who have in turn then influenced subsequent generations. Catherine of Sienna is an obvious example from way back in the fourteenth century. She was already 'joint' patron saint of Italy, together with Francis of Assisi, and has recently been 'promoted' to be patron saint of Europe. Padre Pio, from a small village in the south of Italy, has shot to spiritual prominence. Six million visitors a year now visit the village where this spiritual director lived and died less than half a century ago – more than any other religious site in the country.

It certainly feels as though such holy and gifted individuals have made a deeper impression on the soul of the nation than any equivalent in our own country, and one longs to see people embracing a spiritual diet. The equivalent of *The Word for Today* by the tens of thousand would be a great start...!

Advertisements dominate the radio and television channels to a quite extraordinary degree – so much so that it feels as though programmes are just one string of advertisements punctuated by occasional items of news or other issues, rather than the other way round. This has led to an overkill of consumerism, and to an emphasis on lightness, as well as to a lack of objectivity concerning wider issues. It is all a long way from an active fear of the Lord.

I have always enjoyed the writings of Carlo Carretto. A leader in the influential Catholic Action movement in the 1950's, God called him to lay down his active ministry and to go and live and work in the wilderness in Africa. He later returned to Italy, where he set many things up again. I have no way of assessing how far reaching his influence has been, but it is certainly a 'type of' something effective to pray for. Let there be more please Lord!

In Assisi we came across a group who were presenting as a dance-musical film the life of Clare (St Francis' friend and contemporary). It is the sort of thing that is very important in Italy, where visual and artistic stimulation counts for almost everything. Let's pray for the Lord to raise up powerful multi media presentations that proclaim Him clearly, and that make a real impression on the soul of this nation that has played such an important part in history.

The photographs in this edition include a panoramic view of Assisi, Ros with members of a dance company in Assisi, part of the sanctuary at Catherine of Siena's house, one of many beautiful views from our village, and finally a picture I took of an ancient well – a symbol, perhaps, of all that the Lord is wanting to uncap in Italy.

