

Rome, 30th August 2019

Resistance in the Valleys

Regular readers of this blog will remember George¹, the young Gambian man who made it to Lampedusa following a horrific journey which included detention in Libya, and who now lives in Piedmont.

This week I've been in Piedmont for the annual synod of the Waldensian Church, one of the FCEI's member churches, now united with the Italian Methodist Church. Torre Pellice, which nestles in the Alpine area now known as the "Waldensian Valleys", plays host to this meeting every year. The location is inextricably linked with the tumultuous history of this minority Protestant church which sprang to life 800 years ago and whose members have been persecuted, exiled and discriminated against for much of that time. The serene mountain setting belies the spirit of resistance which has prevailed throughout. As I took the opportunity to visit the newly renovated the Waldensian museum, which carefully charts their story, I was struck by how that spirit of resistance, kindled by the prejudice and fear of others, continues today and how it is now channelled into the work which Waldensians persevere in doing for those on the margins.



The trip provided me with an opportunity to catch up with all sorts of people including George, who has been supported by the Diaconia Valdese since arriving in Italy. When I last wrote about him, he had very recently had his meeting with the Territorial Commission which decides asylum applications. During the long months awaiting their decision, George continued his valuable work as a carer. He studied hard and passed tough exams in Italian (his sixth language) which would give him the formal qualification required for a permanent contract. He is currently holding down two jobs: one in a local hospital and the other in a residential home for people who are severely disabled. He will shortly be leaving the accommodation provided by the Diaconia Valdese for an apartment which he will be renting in his own right. In September, the curling season will start and, all being well, he will once again take up his place in the First Africa Curling Team.

¹ Not his real name.

So far, so positive. So you will be as galled as I am to know that George's application for asylum has been refused. This, of course, is nothing to the shock which George felt on learning of that decision, and the heightened sense of uncertainty which it generated. Whilst praise was given by the Commission for his considerable efforts to integrate into the local community, its members did not agree that George had met the test to acquire refugee status. Worse still, other channels for someone like George to obtain residence in Italy are few and far between.

Resistance comes in many forms and George is not going to give up. He does not believe that it is safe for him to return to The Gambia - and he is now well settled in Italy. He has a life to lead and so much to offer his community. He has therefore appealed the Commission's decision. It will, however, be another two years before he learns the outcome of the appeal.

Whether or not George succeeds, his case highlights the failure of a system which ignores the positive contributions which migrants can make. When a system is essentially based on protection or humanitarian criteria and leaves little or no room for others to adopt another country as their own, it is the receiving country which is likely to miss out. Legal channels for migration which permit realistic numbers to immigrate are not floodgates but filters which enable the kind of people you'd want in your community to join it, irrespective of their country of origin. How long will it take, I wonder, to shift the policy focus from keeping numbers down to populating society with the kind of citizens who can make a difference?

It is little wonder that Waldensians should have such a deep-seated commitment to those, like George, who are pushed to the edges of society, for that has been their own story. Such work, however, will only be done when society at large starts to adopt that spirit, and marginalisation becomes nothing more than a distant memory.