

## March 2017

I could have met the Pope on Saturday - really met him. He invited all the Protestant pastors in Milan to meet him before he went on to another event in Monza.

I could have met the Pope... but I didn't. Why? Well. In Italy, at least until the 19th century, Protestants were persecuted (I mean forced to live in ghettos and burned alive in the streets, persecuted). For this reason, I wasn't sure what to do...

Many Protestants still report that they face discrimination (e.g. are never promoted in the workplace and so on). Thus, although its true that Francis has asked the Italian Protestant churches for forgiveness, centuries of cruelty are not easily forgotten. As a result, something as simple as my wearing a clerical collar, or even lighting a candle in church, can unsettle people - distracting them from the service.

"Still..." someone asked me, "...why don't you just go quietly?" Well, his coming clashed with an event organised by our own church - a special lecture about Martin Luther - and so I would have had to give my apologies. I feared not going to a lecture about the Reformation because "I'm going to see the Pope" might go down like a lead balloon (with several bricks tied to it).

Its so different in England. Historically, the situation has almost been the reverse of that in Italy. For centuries our laws prevented Catholics from holding public office. While things have undoubtedly changed, its interesting that Tony Blair waited until leaving office to become a Catholic.

On the day of the visit the roads were all closed (in order for the faithful to march towards the cathedral). Our event was in the opposite direction and I found myself swimming against this great tide of faith. As I struggled to make my way through the crowd I finally realised what it means to be a Protestant in a Catholic country.

Prayer requests:

In 2017, as we commemorate 500 years since Luther's thesis, please pray for there to be a greater unity, understanding and love between Christians.

Please pray for us, that we will have wisdom and sensitivity to minister in this context.

Please pray that we get our residence permits.

Please pray that we continue to develop our language skills (and thank God that Kwame and John are already fluent Italian speakers.