

Extended Herald Interview – Ben Barnabas

Ben Barnabas has worked in Tunisia as a ‘creative access’ missionary with AWM, and was able to experience the early days of the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ that is sweeping through the Arab world. This is the extended version of the interview we published in the June edition of the GBM Herald.

‘Ben Barnabas’ is a pseudonym.

JS: Explain to us how the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ started.

BB: The events started with the death of a vegetable seller called Mohammad Bouazizi in Sidibouzid. We had prayed in that city and it was considered a God-forsaken place but of course it wasn’t God-forsaken. But it was in the back of beyond – a ‘no hope’ kind of place. And the city came to symbolise where Tunisia was at. Mohammad Bouazizi was a not very well employed young man. He had no prospects, just selling vegetables. He was humiliated, slapped in the face by a female police officer and he said ‘if I don’t have justice (his cart of vegetables was taken away) then I will set light to myself’ which he did. It was filmed, that spread around the country and riots started in December. President Ben Ali’s clamp down didn’t work well and by the week of the 17th January he had fled the country. This shocked everyone, all over the world.

JS I remember at the time that some Christians were published as saying ‘We thought that these constitutional changes would be enough, were good, were acceptable – why were they pushing for more?’ They were worried that this was a more strongly Islamic regime taking hold. What was going on there?

BB No, I don’t think that narrative is right – I think there was damage involving the more conservative Salafist or Jihadist Muslims and I’ll come back to that in a moment, but the reason the crowds pushed for more is because they’ve had to deal with the lies and corruption that the regime produced for a long time. And they knew that what they were doing was stalling, buying time, and that Ben Ali had made many promises at various points in the past and not been able to deliver.

JS A pattern, which let’s be honest, we are seeing repeated across the Arab world.

BB Absolutely. I would have said that Ben Ali was better than a number of benevolent or not so benevolent dictators across the region, but still, of late he had been getting worse and worse. A lot of the blame has gone to his second wife Layla who’s much hated throughout the country.

JS Great dictators always have an evil wife.

BB Absolutely, and in this case she really was! She was attributed with wholesale buying up of big companies by people in her own family. So you had high level corruption and it was starting to be embarrassing. This happens in most of these countries but actually, the Wiki-leaks scandal contributed to this as well, because in the emails that had been sent between US State department officials in Tunisia and the US Government, they could see spelled out in black and white what the US really thought of Ben Ali and his regime, which was he’s a dictator increasingly out of touch with his people. He doesn’t represent them and there’s high level corruption.

JS Have the Wiki-leaks been a major factor in the Jasmine Revolution?

BB I wouldn’t want to give too much credit to Assange and Wiki-leaks but I think the main thing I would say is that the internet and access to information has played a huge part. The younger generation of Tunisia are able to read what people are saying. They’re able to view discussions going on in the European Parliament, and in Parliaments all over the world, because increasingly these things are available, and so that is enabling them to build an opinion. So suddenly they recognise, ‘We’re living in a

situation where people are openly saying that this is a mockery. We don't want this any more – we're not going to believe the lie that a bit of bread on the table and a roof over my head, and the fact that we have better living conditions than a number of sub-saharan Africans or others across the region means that we shouldn't have the freedom to express ourselves or to demonstrate.'

What was so shocking about the revolution was how quickly it happened. This comment came from one of the church leaders in Tunisia –he was talking about the political context and he said "people don't understand yet but I'm telling you now, historians will be writing and they will say 'the first facebook revolution happened in Tunisia'" They're calling it the Arab Spring, or the Jasmine Revolution. There is a great deal of pride in Tunisia that this had started off in a country considered to be quite moderate. You would have expected something like that from Algeria, where people are generally more extreme in all senses, both positive and negative. But it was happening in little old Tunisia. It's a small country; Tunisians are quite relaxed and easy going. They've been used to interacting with people from all over the world for years throughout their history and especially now. So nobody expected it – I didn't! But it happened.

JS And where are we at now in terms of elections scheduled

BB Elections are scheduled for July. They've pretty much kept to the constitution – initially it looked like some people within the old regime were going to fill in the power vacuum – the prime minister Mohammad Ranouchi is quite an honourable man, but of course he's very much linked to the old president, as are most of the cabinet. But the reality is there's nobody in the country at the moment that can run the place. There is no democratic infrastructure – there haven't been any structures to support opposition in any credible way. So they need people from the old regime. I can't begin to describe how dramatic it was for me to come into the environment where suddenly everyone was speaking openly about politics, about faith, about the future of the country, about the old president and there on television debating with representatives from some of the more Islamic parties like the Nahda Party who had come back. All those people who'd been exiled by the old president were now coming back and were expressing their views on television. There was something wonderful about that and exciting – I saw a lot of demonstrations when I was there. Most of it was peaceful.

JS How big is the church in Tunisia?

BB There are around 500 evangelical believers in a population of about 10½ million. There would be others that wouldn't be described as evangelical but would be Biblical believers. Some orthodox churches – there's a significant Catholic presence and there are a lot of Tunisians that have converted to Catholicism. The evangelical Christians got involved in doing street clean ups, making it known that they were Tunisian Christians, doing this because they love their country. They were quite open about their excitement. A journalist friend of mine was very involved in the front line of activity and he made it known that this was now a context where Tunisia was going to be able to express itself, where there would be more pluralism.

JS What were the Christians doing as their response? That was noted and made an impact.

BB It had a huge impact. The first thing they did during the revolution was where there was a lot of damage, they got involved in doing street clean ups. A lot of the general population did that as well but Tunisian believers got out there and made it publically known that they were Christians, that they were part of the Tunisian church and they were doing this because they love their country. The week I was there, some of that backfired – there were some militant muslims who decided to take hold of some of these videos that had been put up on facebook and were being spread around of Christian Tunisians cleaning the streets and openly speaking about their faith and there was a video that was doctored that

featured one of the Tunisian leaders who I spent some time with when I was there and then transposed various other images of Israel and Zionist plots and various other things and had various threats. It was quite an ugly thing targeted particularly towards this man and warning people but the interesting thing was there was a reaction across facebook to that – saying it was so obviously a doctored video.

The Christians were quite open about their excitement. A close friend of mine was very involved in the front line of activity – he's a journalist and somebody who has a programme on Tunisian radio and he made it known that this was now a context where Tunisia was going to be able to express itself where there would be more pluralism and therefore Christians could be free, as could Jews, as could atheists and others.

JS How did the Muslim establishment respond to that?

BB What I see happening at the moment is that there are effectively two strands emerging. This is a simplistic narrative but I think an accurate one. One is a significant number of the population want to move in a more secular direction. Please understand when I say secular, not to interpret it in the context of the secularism we know in the UK but a separation of the role of the state and religion. This would be much like you have in Turkey, and a desire for Tunisian national identity not to be linked to religion and therefore to Islam. Many of those people are Muslims themselves who want that – they think that's a better way for the country to develop.

While I was there, there was a massive demonstration with thousands of people calling for this, which is strange. I thought this was maybe amongst the intellectual elite or just a certain population of westernised people, but it wasn't. So that's one strand – the other strand is many people who want to move in a much more conservative Islamic direction and some of those are quite radical. All Islam in Tunisia is Sunni, and historically, it's been Maliki tradition but increasingly those more radical Muslims have been influenced by a more Wahabbi Salafi interpretation of Islam, so influenced by some of these reformist movements. They are characterised by a desire to cleanse or clean up Islam, and essentially for them, whether it's alcohol, eating pork, the influence of Christianity, Judaism, pornography – it's all in the same bag. It all needs to be cleansed from Tunisian society.

We had contact with a little group doing *Dawa* (the Arabic word for invitational Islamic mission). They were doing Islamic mission in the area and targeted us. Those kind of groups under the old regime had no oxygen – they had no room for manoeuvre – the government and the police structure was brutal with them, to the point which in the early 90's the President cracked down on militants so hard that people just disappeared and to this day no-one knows what happened to them – we assume they've been executed. What you need to understand is that with this change in January, suddenly some of those people who hadn't had any freedom to express themselves suddenly have freedom. When the President left, about 10,000 convicts were released from prison. Now it's said that the police did this to destabilise the country but whichever way, you have all these people who had been locked up in prison, many of whom are just common convicts, suddenly released. Others had committed political crimes or the crime simply of looking at militant Islamic websites. Some of those were genuinely innocent people but who were sympathetic with the more conservative or radical view of Islam but hadn't necessarily committed any crimes.

JS How big and how significant do you think that group is in Tunisian society?

BB Well it's very hard to determine. When I asked that question, they said numerically not that big but able to influence quite a lot. Actually there is a significant percentage of the population that wouldn't be characterised as radical in that way, but would be more conservative Muslims, wanting to

move Tunisia away from secularism and more towards something closer to a conservative Islamic conception. For example, they would be comfortable with reforming Tunisia's progressive legislation on the rights of women so they would be happy to return to allowing Muslim men to have as many as four wives.

JS Would they deny women access to higher education?

BB I've never heard even those who are very conservative say they didn't think women should be educated – you would associate that more with the Taliban.

JS: Which do you think is going to win?

BB I really don't know – I don't think Tunisians can tell you either. I think that the future is going to be messy. My prayer and my hope is that courageous men and women will selflessly lead Tunisia through a period of three to four years of transition until Tunisians start getting used to plurality of expression.

JS None of the first generation of democratic leaders in Eastern European survived, did they? They all got voted out after one turn in office. But they were the guys who broke the door down.

BB So we need some door breakers.

JS Is there a real door opening for evangelism as a result of this? Is there a greater freedom?

BB Yes and no. Yes there are freedoms. For example, within a week of these events in January, two of the church leaders had gone to the Ministry of Justice to register two organisations they wanted to start a development organisation in the name of the Christian church of Tunisia, as well as an organisation for the protection of minorities in the name of the church of Tunisia. They saw it as an immediate opportunity of having a window that's open so the courts would be much more free and fair. Recent events down at the Libyan border, with the refugees – there are huge camps – are significant. A lot of Christians are doing things. One Christian development organisation that brings foreigners to do transformational development work but they involve a lot of local believers. It seized the opportunity with the Libyan situation to demonstrate in a very concrete way, the love of God in Christ.

JS Works of compassion also bring proclamation opportunities.

BB Yes absolutely. The organisation that I mentioned embodies that vision of holistic ministry which is seizing every opportunity to proclaim the message in culturally appropriate ways and also demonstrate the message.

JS What kind of missionary is needed to reach the Arab world today?

BB All kinds to be honest. I think the Arab world needs people who are willing to spend time in the culture – learn the language, be there for ideally more than five years and work in teams in a range of creative ways. We've seen opportunities in teaching but there are many other opportunities in business and in development work. There could be more across the region.

JS In some countries like Egypt with a significant Christian presence, might there be scope for a church planter to go in openly or would that depend on the new regime that's elected?

BB It depends. The situation in Egypt is that, unlike Tunisia where there's been no established political opposition, in Egypt there's been the Muslim Brotherhood that's been operating as a social movement as well as a political movement for many years, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon. People single out the organisation as being a radical Islamist organisation that therefore shouldn't be dealt with

because they're just terrorists. Some of them are but others are social reformers. These are the people that are helping the poor, the sick. They are filling in where the government isn't able to respond to need. That's a challenge to the church and to Christians – can we be meeting people at their point of need as the Church does all over the world? Not in order to compete with Hezbollah or the Muslim Brotherhood but in order to be salt and light in those contexts and an alternative vision of transformation.

JS Will there be a new wave of persecution?

BB I think there will be in Tunisia. Egypt I'm not sure about – during the revolution it was interesting that Muslims and Christians seemed to come together. There were a number of reports of this: a church was protected by a ring of Muslims during one of the demonstrations and vice versa when it looked like the army might attack a huge crowd of Muslim people who were praying, a group of Christians who had been demonstrating formed a ring around this group to protect them. Such signs of real human solidarity are very encouraging. But in Egypt there were also reports of families and tribes fighting over intermarriage. I suspect that if the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has more political power that it will be harder for Christians, but harder doesn't necessarily mean no more opportunities for the gospel to grow. It might just mean more people die and are persecuted but the church might thrive in that context. There's been enough of a move of Muslims coming to Christ in Egypt – people are talking of more than a million in Egypt, good sized pockets of people, and that's the generation in the church that's going to grow rapidly. All ages are being saved. I heard recently about families and a lot of young people but also some of the older generation as well. In Tunisia I think there are hard times ahead. My prayer is that the believers would be united because there's always issues of divisions and we'll be humble and be bold and persevere in prayer.

JS How much was prayer at the root of these events?

BB I want to encourage your readers with the power of prayer, and the value and importance that God gives to our prayers. We do it all the time but sometimes we don't imagine that God would actually work through the prayers of his people but that's why he calls us to pray. It's a mystery how God works in his sovereignty but the fact is he does call us to pray. We were involved in a prayer initiative, a seven year covenant of humble, united, bold prayer to see a humble, united, and bold church. That lasted from 2003 to the end of 2010. We co-ordinated prayer trips to different parts of the country but also information went out to believers around the world who were praying for Tunisia. There were a number of images that came up as people were praying - we would weigh these things up. One of our jobs was to try and hear from different people in different places and one picture or image that came up in different forms time and time again was that though Tunisia was a small country, God would use it to affect change across the region. One image was a set of dominos being knocked over, starting in Tunisia. Another image was an earthquake with the epicentre being in Tunisia. Another was of a hurricane starting in Tunisia and going across the region. All of this we summed up and we have notes to this effect, as small Tunisia, like a stick of dynamite, was going to crack open some kind of change across the region. The change wasn't going to be pain free but God would use that for his purposes. We didn't know when this was going to happen but just an impression that after this time of prayer, it would happen.

The covenant of prayer finished at the end of 2010 – these events I'm describing kicked off in January 2011! I've got friends who are cautious about reading too much into that, but we see the hand of God in these events. I heard Edward Sturton on Radio 4 use this expression when these events were going on – he said “we're going to call it the 'Tunisia factor'. This tiny little nation of Tunisia is affecting change across the region” I nearly fell over in my kitchen when I heard him say that! I think we need to realise

that God does work through prayers. It is a mystery – it's not because of the expertise of our prayers – it's because he wants to effect change through his people.