



Lea and Petra Williams

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Location: Czech Republic



What we do: Leading the Anglican congregation in Brno and developing a vibrant Christian community where people can meet Jesus and grow as disciples.

Dear friends,

Here's one annual contender for the best (worst) Christmas cracker joke: Good King Wenceslas calls his local pizzeria. "I'd like a pizza delivered, please." "Certainly, will that be the usual order, your Majesty?" asks the voice at the other end. "Yes," says Wenceslas, "deep pan, crisp and even."

Due to the loud groans we may miss the opportunity to reflect on the subject – Good King Wenceslas. This is the anglicised name of Svatý Václav, a tenth century Duke of Bohemia and the now revered patron saint of the Czech Republic. In the nineteenth century, the hymn writer John Mason Neale famously used his example to teach about the importance of generosity at Christmas. You may remember the moving way in which he tracks down an unknown beggar in a snowstorm to give him a feast. The Christian life, the carol concludes, should be one which blesses the poor, for that is where blessing is to be found.

In recent months the Czech people have certainly shown the sort of kindness and compassion celebrated in this carol to the 400,000 refugees who have settled here. This week it was reported that the Czech Republic has been one of the biggest donors and taken in the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita. Perhaps it is because it has known many invasions and occupations and seen the terrible horrors of war that Brno shows such levels of solidarity.

One of the main organisations in the city working with Ukrainian families is VESNA (The Women's Educational Institute). They're doing wonderful work and we mentioned in our last update that Petra is now spending some of her time there. In the early days of the war their work mainly focused on providing material assistance and short-term accommodation. Between February and October, tens of thousands accessed their "wardrobe" offering material assistance. As the situation has developed, they are now offering safe spaces for sharing emotions, providing activities and workshops for both children and adults, as well as functioning as a signpost to other specialised services. We are currently seeking ways of supporting VESNA further.

As we write, the snow has started falling and the temperature is dropping. While the Czech people have been warm and accommodating, the rise in the cost of living and greater strain on public services are significant and has, for a vocal minority, caused some resentment. Indeed, last month, on the feast day of St Wenceslas (a state holiday) "tens of thousands" of protestors gathered in St Wenceslas Square in Prague



Olivia and Ted sorting baby grows at VESNA.

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to call on the government to reduce their support and involvement. The following week a larger counter protest was held. Please pray for kindness and tolerance, for our leaders to have wisdom, and for those who seek to support families from Ukraine, strength.

Our ministry is very varied and brings us into contact with people from all walks of life. In September Lea was invited to participate in a service to commemorate the life of Queen Elizabeth II at the cathedral in Prague Castle. The ecumenical service was attended by Miloš Zeman, the president of the Czech Republic. Unfortunately for Petra our kids were in quarantine with chickenpox, but she was able

to watch the service from home as it was shown live on Czech television. We also held a service here in Brno. Interestingly, it was mostly attended by Czechs who felt great affection for the late Queen.

The Anglican community continues to meet in the city each week. Last Sunday we had a lively and joyful gathering, a mix of younger families and students from various parts of the world. We value hospitality and spending time together over meals, worshipping and sharing life together. We would appreciate prayers for a weekly Bible study/preparation for baptism held each week, as well as Christmas services. For one of these we've hired a larger building and will be supported by a choir made up from students at one of the local universities, a bagpiper, and it will be in aid of Vesna. Please continue to pray for relationships to deepen as community is formed.

Good King Wenceslas is sometimes questioned as a Christmas carol for not including the nativity, and yet it does so beautifully remind us of the kindness and generosity of another King, one who forgoes his palace to enter a dark and stormy world to rescue a helpless man. It is the pattern for the Christian life (Philippians 2).

At times the darkness can feel terribly heavy and peace hard to find. Today, so many people live in the night. For some time we've been reflecting on an old Hasidic tale retold by Henri Nouwen (Finding My Way Home, 2001). Perhaps you might find it helpful too:

The rabbi asked his students: "How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?"

"When from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?" One student suggested. "Is it when one can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?" asked a second.

"No," the rabbi said.

"Please tell us the answer, then," said the students.

"It is, then," said the wise teacher, "when you can look into the face of another human being and you have enough light in you to recognize your brother or your sister. Until then it is night, and darkness is still with us."

Thank you, as always, for your prayers and friendship. May the Lord fill us with his light and joy to bring good news to others this Christmastide.

Lea and Petra



Photos from top to bottom: Petra taking part in Brno's Red Dress Run, a charity event in aid of VESNA; Lea participating at St Vitus Cathedral, Prague; A poignant end to the Commemorative service in Brno; Olivia working hard in our future living room, maybe...



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