

Martin and Fran Russell working with



February 2021

Dear friends at BH

Here we are, a year since the world began hearing about Coronavirus. Life is very different and does not look like changing anytime soon. These days, like many of you, we appreciate the small things; birdsong, coffee in proper cups at the bar, (only possible when your region is in the yellow zone) the different colours of the river, bumping into neighbours outside and chatting. Yesterday Tuscany changed after 5 weeks in the yellow zone, which meant eateries were open at lunch time, back to orange. So we have to stay in our local area and are restricted to home deliveries only. The numbers here have been rising so it wasn't a surprise. Most shops are open, so it could be much worse and we can still go and collect up Gioia, who lives in a different area of Florence to us, as long as we take a self-certification with us, in case we are stopped.

Psalm 27

Last week I (Fran) read Psalm 27 and was struck by the last verse

“Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord”.

I didn't ever think waiting involved being brave ... but waiting for the Lord does mean trusting that He will do something ... that can be scary. So, the psalmist tells me I have to be brave. Then I read the same verse in the Amplified Translation.

“Wait for and confidently expect the Lord. Be strong and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for and confidently expect the Lord”.

So I can expect the Lord to do something, but I have to take courage. Finally, I read this in The Praise Translation.

“Here's what I've learned through it all: Don't give up; don't be impatient. be entwined as one with the Lord. Be brave and courageous, and never lose hope. Yes, keep on waiting for He will never disappoint you!”

This is my prayer for us today.

Dear Heavenly Father, as we live in this uncertain time, thank you for the certainty of You, that You are with us and will never leave us. Thank you that we can be expectant, even for the impossible. For with you “Nothing is impossible”. Thank you that “You are singing over us with love”. Please dear Father help us be strong in this uncertain time, because our hope is in You and, as these verses promise; You will never disappoint us. Amen.

Agape Family Gathering Zoom Conference 18th – 19th February 2021

Thursday this week the staff from Agape Italia meet for a two-day conference, we will be joined by some of our volunteers for the Friday afternoon sessions. Here are our aims for the time.

Pray and be inspired by God's word, *Including self-guided meditation and teaching.*

Be re-envisioned by next steps for Agape Italia, *including the National Leadership Team's plans for the next five years.*

Discover more about your part in our mission to Italy, *including how we can all play a part nationally.*

Martin is giving one of the morning meditations from Exodus and the story of Moses father-in-law Jethro. He gives advice to Moses on how to better use his time and talents in order to fulfil what God has called him to do. Fran is helping to organise the preparation. Please will you remember the Agape Italia staff in your prayers on Thursday and Friday.

Collaboration in Florence

The student teams in Rome and Florence have developed a series of Instagram lives that involved professors, two student associations and even the chief of Education in Florence. The theme of the interviews was "what would you save from 2020?" It was an incredible opportunity for our Student Ministry colleagues Gianluca and Simona, to build relationships with students and professors, and it opened up conversations about hope and what good can come from 2020.

For students the digital and the physical worlds intertwine and overlap. Conversations had online don't stay there. Articles, attention-grabbing graphics and Instagram stories have power to sway opinions and introduce new perspectives. Social media weaves through student culture and one of values is to be where students are present. So it has been especially encouraging in the past month, as we have struggled to become more consistent, strategic and relevant in our social media to see it bear fruit.

Catching up with Zoom or WhatsApp calls

We are enjoying weekly Zoom calls with you. We usually time it over lunch so all of us have time to catch up, talk, eat and pray. Please get in touch if you would like to meet us in this way. We are also open to other times if lunchtime is not good for you. The calls usually last about an hour, but we can have a shorter chat if that would be better. Praise the Lord for the new technology which includes WhatsApp and Zoom. Life without it is unthinkable.

Prayer and opportunities

Both of us have been spending more time reading our bibles and praying, than a year ago. Most days, around 10.00, we have a coffee together and pray for our days, world events and our friends and families. Here are some of the answers to prayer.

- At Fran's monthly appointment with her chiropodist Giulia, Giulia shared something personal which had really upset her. Fran prayed for Giulia out loud in a mixture of Italian and English. She was very appreciative. Fran has promised to keep praying. She sees Giulia again on March 10th.
- Fran organises a weekly 90-minute Zoom call for her English speaking international friends. Over the weeks she has prayed, again out loud and with permission, for one friend, with another listening. Shared her story of how and why she became a Christian a couple of times and sent WhatsApp texts containing bible verses countless times to different friends. The Lord Jesus is at work giving Fran opportunities to show His love for her friends.
- Kylie recently asked Fran "what exactly is prayer?" A brilliant question. Fran was brought up as a Catholic so as a new Christian thought prayer was "The Our Father" and "The Hail Mary", so rote prayers. She had no idea prayer was just talking to God so could relate to Kylie's question and empathise. They had a long conversation.

Changed lives, in a doggy way, not spiritual!!



Saturday 20th February, we pick Gioia, our Jack Russell puppy, up from the breeder, Stefano and bring her home. We are looking forward to having her here. Gioia means joy in Italian and is pronounced Joyer, so joy with the lawyer YER ending!!!

Martin's health hasn't been great, so having Gioia here means he has someone else to think about and enjoy being with. Plus, this could be a way for him to make friends with other dog owners. We hope you enjoy these photos of Gioia, they make a change from photos of our Zoom meetings, which was another option!!!!

Our lives continue to be a mixture of virtual meetings and trainings. We are so thankful for the technology that allows this to happen but are becoming increasingly weary and "Zoomed out". Please pray that we will be able to contribute to all the important meetings we are part of.

Please continue to pray for both of us, to have more opportunities to speak about the hope we have in Jesus. This will mostly be across the internet as we are avoiding mixing with friends face to face. Martin's latest treatment is an immunosuppressant, so we need to continue to be careful. The population in Tuscany is over 3 and a half million people. 730,000 are over 70 so it could be a while before we have our vaccinations. Currently Tuscany has vaccinated 193,280 people.

*Thank you so much for your ongoing prayers,
encouragement and support for us*

With our love, as always

Martin + Franxx

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