

WELCOME TO Australia

It was a big gamble, but it got their attention. Fifteen hundred pairs of Muslim eyes focused on me as I walked up to the speaker at the podium, kissed him on both cheeks in the Arab style and said, "Welcome to Australia."

The speaker, a big bushy-bearded Texan and well-known convert to Islam, had been pillorying Christianity for several hours in these widely-publicised lectures for Muslims at Melbourne University. At the end of his talk he asked for questions, but specified that they could be written only – no verbal questions were allowed. However, when he received the questions – most of them written by us, the small handful of Christians occupying the front row – the Texan simply shuffled the papers and ignored their contents.

Exasperated, we in the front row held up sheets of paper with big letters: Please answer our questions! He took the hint, began to read some of them, then laughed and said, "Funny, these are all in the same handwriting, but I can't understand them."

The audience laughed too. That's when I

seized the opportunity, walked up to him and kissed him. "Welcome to Australia. I wrote these questions. Let me help you read them."

The audience laughed nervously as the big Texan took the initiative back. He leaned over and whispered to me, "If you don't sit down right now, I'll have you escorted out."

Seeing his minders ready to pounce, I announced to the audience: "Well, I tried to help him, didn't I?"

Some clapped. The Texan turned to his cameras: "Can you make sure that is erased from the final take?" Disappointed, I sat back down. The Texan continued to drone on, ignoring us and our questions. It seemed the gamble had not paid off.

As we filed out of the lecture theatre, a young Muslim man was waiting for me. "Are you a Christian?" he asked. I nodded. "I want to learn about Christianity. Could you teach me?"

Javed hadn't been in Australia for very long, having recently entered on a student visa. Over the next few months we met regularly, and he began studying the Bible seriously. He seemed very grateful for my time, and didn't raise any objections to what I was teaching him. But then one day I received a text message from him: "I'm in big trouble. I must see you soon."

We met at the university and Javed showed me a court order: he'd been in a fight with a flatmate, and was being charged with

causing grievous bodily harm. I helped him find a solicitor and a barrister, and at the court case several months later I was a character witness for him.

When Javed pleaded guilty and received a four-month prison sentence, I committed to visiting him regularly. He was grateful.

"I'm reading the Bible every day," he told me, but then added, "and I'm finding it agrees completely with the Qur'an."

He became involved with the prison Islamic group, praying regularly with them and even preaching at their weekly services. He had decided that Jesus was just a messenger, like all the other messengers of God - it looked as if he was going nowhere spiritually.

At the completion of his prison sentence, the Department of Immigration decided to deport Javed for not fulfilling the requirements of his student visa.

"I'm too tired to appeal," he told me when I went to visit him, thinking it might be for the last time. "I'm returning to India soon. You have been a great friend and a teacher. Is there anything you would like to say to me?"

"Yes, there is." I replied. "Yesterday I was at a mosque in Maidstone, and the speaker was criticising Christianity. Afterwards I went to the front and asked if I could have the chance to respond to his criticisms, and this time they let me. I was there for about four hours, and it became very apparent that Muslims and Christians believe quite

different things. Muslims say that Jesus was just a messenger; Christians believe that He is the Son of God. Muslims believe that Jesus did not die; Christians believe that He died for the sins of the whole world. Muslims believe that they will enter paradise by their good works; Christians believe that it is only by the grace of God. Javed, it seems that you think that you can be both a Muslim and a Christian at the same time. But I think that you have to choose between them.”

He went quiet, then he said, “Today I am choosing to follow Jesus and to become a Christian.” I was overjoyed. “But,” he said. “There is the problem of my family. They are strict Muslims. What will I say to them?”

I told him that his faith was a matter between himself and God, and that the right time would come for him to tell them. I told him the stories of other Muslims I knew who had made the same journey, and eventually their families were accepting of their decision, and some members had even joined the Kingdom of God themselves.

The next day, when we met to do some discipleship studies, Javed gave me two bits of news. He had decided to appeal his deportation order, since his prison sentence had prevented him from completing the studies required by his visa. He had also told his parents that he had become a Christian, and was heartbroken by their response.

“We will have nothing to do with you!” were his father’s angry words. “Do not ever come back home again!”

As I write this, Javed is still waiting in the Immigration Detention Centre for the outcome of his appeal. I visit him almost daily and he is growing in his faith in Christ. I am praying that he might become an ardent evangelist for Christ, just as he once preached Islam with passion and conviction.

Paul stated his long-standing ambition as “to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. Rather, as it is written: ‘Those who were not told about Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand’” (Romans 15:20-21).

In past times, such a plan involved a long physical journey by boat or plane. Today, with 100,000 Muslims in Melbourne, and 23% of Australia’s population born overseas, it simply involves a walk across the street or a ride across the town. This is all part of the sovereign work of God who “from one man made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the

times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26). The Lord of the entire world is bringing people from all over the world to Australia, so they can hear the good news. May we always cooperate with Him in His work. ☞

Bernie works with CultureConnect, an IS ministry to people of non-English speaking backgrounds in Australia, and is the guest speaker at our NZ Interserve Day on Saturday, 22 May 2010.

