

## 5. Gerasimenko – The Journey Home (Where is our home town?)

When I was serving as a Mission Partner in Russia, Colin Ride – who was then Europe Secretary in the World Church Office – came out to visit me. One of the places we visited in St. Petersburg was a souvenir market. This painting was on display at one of the stalls and Colin bought it. He told me that the Methodist Church has a fund to buy works of art from different parts of the world and he thought that this would be an appropriate addition to the collection. The painting is by a Ukrainian artist called Sergei Gerasimenko and is entitled “The Journey Home”.

A few months after Colin had returned home with this painting I had an email from the Communications Department at Methodist Church House asking me if I could track down the artist and get copyright permission from him to use this image for the Connexional Team Christmas card. I tried to find a phone number or email address for Gerasimenko through various websites which featured him and his work but got nowhere. The next time I was in St. Petersburg – which is 200 miles from where I was living in Pskov – I went back to the stall where Colin had bought the painting and asked the woman there if she knew how to get in touch with the artist. She told me that he lived in St. Petersburg and that she had his phone number at home. She gave me her phone number and we agreed that I would ring her when I got back to Pskov and she would give me the number for Gerasimenko.

To cut a long story short, I eventually got through to Gerasimenko’s wife who told me that he was currently painting in Ukraine – where he spends a significant part of each year - and would not be back in St. Petersburg for several months. She gave me a phone number in Ukraine and I finally managed to speak to the artist himself and negotiate a deal with him! He was very happy to give copyright in exchange for a sum of money which I had agreed with Methodist Church House and we arranged to meet up in St. Petersburg when he returned from Ukraine. Eventually, well over a year after the Communications Office had originally got in touch with me, I went to

Gerasimenko's house, gave him the money and ended up buying another of his paintings to take home with me myself!

That's a rather long introduction to this painting but it gives you an insight into the journey which it has been on before coming to Swanwick! This final Bible Study focuses on the journey home because that is where we will all be moving on to later today. And so let us hear two Bible Passages which talk about the Holy Family's journey home to Nazareth:

MATTHEW 2:19-23

LUKE 2:39-40

I wanted us to hear both those passages because they give a mixed message about Nazareth. Matthew seems to suggest that Joseph had planned to take the family elsewhere – possibly back to Bethlehem - but had yet another dream warning him to stay away from Judea and settle instead in Nazareth. The implication is that this was a new home for the family and that they had never lived there before.

Luke, however, told us at the annunciation that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth and in the verse we have just heard it is clear that the journey to Nazareth is a homecoming. "They returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth". According to Luke, Nazareth is a familiar place for the Holy Family. This truly is a journey home.

One of the questions I was frequently asked in Russia was "What is your home-town?" and people were very perplexed when I said that I didn't really have one. Russia is not a particularly transient society. Because of the need to register in your home-town – which I referred to during the Journey to Bethlehem Bible Study yesterday – it is not easy to move from one town to another and most people stay in one place for the whole of their life.

I was born into a Methodist manse and so my life has been itinerant from the very beginning. Home has always been wherever I am living at the moment and I have always been able to settle in a new place and make a home for myself quite quickly.

However, that does not mean that the journey home from Russia was easy!

I will spare you the story of how the freight company sent me an email two days before they were supposed to come and collect all my stuff from Pskov to tell me that they would not be able to come after all! Then there is the episode where my mother had to clamber into the back of a huge lorry and single-handedly unload all my boxes onto her neighbour's drive because the driver refused to leave his cabin or reverse down her road! Those are just fairly standard stories of the stress of moving house and I imagine that all of us here have a tale to tell about that!

But the journey home – or any transition we make – always involves an inner emotional journey as well as the physical labour of getting from A to B.

When I left Russia I did not feel that I was coming home. I felt that I was leaving home. Russia had become my home. Pskov had become my home-town. Back in the UK I would be moving to a new appointment in a part of London which was unfamiliar to me. I had seen the house which was to become my home but I had not furniture except the coffee table in my Mum's loft and many of the things which would make this house a home were Russian. I had a Russian tea set and Russian crockery. I had Russian tablecloths and tea-towels. I had Russian pictures and Russian ornaments, Russian CD's and Russian DVD's, Russian dolls and Russian books.

There were things about coming back to Britain which did feel like a home coming – things I had been homesick for in Russia. It was wonderful to worship in English and especially to sing hymns in my native tongue again. I was glad to be back in the land of fish and chips

and takeaways! I have enjoyed catching up with Casualty and Holby City!

But there are times – even nine months after my journey home – when England still feels like an alien place to me and I find myself being suddenly hit by culture shock all over again. I still want to take my shoes off when I enter someone’s home – as is the custom in Russia. I keep offering people behind the till the correct change because this was always demanded in shops in Russia. I sometimes find myself thinking in Russian or wanting to say something which I can express perfectly well in Russian but don’t know how to say in English! I am shocked by the prices of everything, overwhelmed by the choice in supermarkets and surprised by the ease and speed with which tasks like buying a train ticket can be accomplished.

I still find it hard to answer the question - where is home for you? I now live in East Ham in East London and I absolutely love it! It’s my dream appointment. I hear Russian spoken on the streets or on the bus practically every day and have my hair cut at a Russian hairdresser’s. I have two congregations – both of which are incredibly diverse and where people regularly talk about “back home” meaning Africa, Asia or the Caribbean. When people tell me after church or after a meeting that they are going home I have to check whether they mean that they are going back to an East London street or heading off for some sunshine in a distant land!

Last Saturday I conducted a Ghanaian funeral for a 32 year old man. The service in church lasted a couple of hours and was intensely emotional. There was weeping and wailing and a huge outpouring of grief and love. Afterwards, I travelled with the family in one of the funeral cars to the cemetery. It is about a fifteen minute drive and we travelled in silence until we saw the gates of the cemetery. Then one of the women in the back of the car said: “This is the end of the road. This is the end of his journey”. Part of me wanted to say “Yes – but it is also the beginning of a new journey” - but I kept quiet. This **was** the end of the journey for this young man. It was the journey home – the journey home to the God who created him.

Jesus made his home in Nazareth –and later the people of that town tried to hurl him off the cliff when he preached in their synagogue. But Jesus passed through the midst of the crowd and went on his way. The whole of his ministry was spent in transit. “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” said Jesus. Jesus was constantly moving and travelling on. He made his home amongst us here on earth but his home town was really in heaven.

The journey home – what does that mean to you? Is it about a place on earth – or is it also about your journey home to God?

### The Journey Home

1. Where is your home-town?
2. How do you think the Holy Family were received when they arrived in Nazareth?
3. What has been your most memorable experience of homecoming?
4. Have you ever been homesick? What were you homesick for?
5. What does “the journey home” mean to you? Is it about a place on earth or is it also about your journey home to God?

*Each person is invited to take a luggage label and write on it what they are going to take home with them from this weekend.*