

A First Visit to South Sudan

It is said that girls in South Sudan have a higher chance of dying in childbirth than of completing their school education. The country is one of the poorest in the world, yet is a land of extraordinary beauty and abundant natural resources. One of the least developed nations in the world, with an almost non-existent transport and communications infrastructure and limited access to energy, clean water, healthcare or education, where communities have lived for decades in fear as a result of civil war and tribal conflict, it is nevertheless a place where people have great hope for a future of peace and well-being.

Forty years ago, Bishop George Reindorp inaugurated a relationship between the Episcopal Church in Sudan and the Diocese of Salisbury. Very new to the idea of forming a more local partnership with one or more dioceses in South Sudan, we travelled via Nairobi in Kenya to the capital Juba with four others from Purbeck Deanery.

After a night in Juba we took a 'bus' to Torit, around 90 miles to the East, but four and a half hours away because of the appalling roads. In the event, the journey was rather longer, as something essential fell off the bus about three-quarters of the way there, leaving us stranded until a couple of Roman Catholic lay workers saw us at the roadside. Leaving the 'locals' to fend for themselves, they picked us up and took us the rest of the way.

Despite the poverty of our hosts, their hospitality was immensely generous, our accommodation spare but comfortable and food delicious. Torit's diocesan compound contains several houses, mostly traditional Tukels - circular mud and cane walls surmounted by a thatched roof, supported on a frame above the walls to allow 360° ventilation - but some simple brick buildings with 'tin' roofs.

The school has some brick-built classrooms but other classes are held under open thatched roofs. Children whose parents can afford one come to school with a simple plastic chair, but many simply sit on the ground. Classroom equipment consists of a blackboard and chalk and there is nothing pasted on the bare brick of the walls, in contrast with the colourful classrooms of schools here. I was hesitant about showing pictures I'd taken of our St Mark's Primary School in Swanage, but teachers in Torit were delighted and by the time we left I had messages for all the teachers at St Mark's and a clear enthusiasm for building a relationship between the schools, with e-mail addresses exchanged - the school in Torit has access to the computer in the Bishop's Office.

Bishop Bernard was with us for most of the time we spent in Torit. While I came away with a sense that we needed to respond in some way to the basic material needs that we saw, his view was that our willingness to simply be there was the most important thing - to visit and show that there are people in the world who care about his people, who have lived for decades with conflict, fear and uncertainty. They are traumatised and feel helpless and unrecognised by the international community.

It's with his words in mind that I'm visiting again in February, when Torit has its biennial diocesan synod over five days; but the basic needs of the community there, as I described them, moved those who came to St Mary's for our special Christmas services to give over £2,000 in the collections to support "clean water, health and education projects in the Diocese of Torit". A further £300 came from the Epiphany Team Service at St Mark's and of course I'd be delighted to add any gifts to that total.

You can donate by cash or cheque (made payable to Swanage PCC) placed in an envelope clearly marked "Sudan appeal" - and you can gift aid if you pay income tax by stating clearly on the envelope your name and address and stating you wish us to claim gift aid. Please deliver your envelope to the Parish Office, St Mary's Church, Swanage, BH19 1HU.

Here are some photos of Torit and the neighbouring Ofhira village which we visited, where Bishop Bernard's diocese is building a primary health care centre. I will try to keep you up-to-date with what I hope will be a developing Deanery relationship with Torit and also with Terekeka, a neighbouring diocese.

With my prayers and best wishes for 2013,

John Wood