

## NEWSLETTER FROM SOUTH SUDAN NO 5

Wiltshire, 13 November

Dear friends

Although I have now returned from South Sudan, my mind and heart are still full of the experience – and also, I could not finish the story in the last newsletter, as we still had four days to go before leaving. So here is a brief account of the highlights of the last few days, and then some reflections.



On Sunday morning (3 November) both Andrew and I were to preach in Mundri Cathedral – Andrew at the 8.30 English service, me at the 10.30 “Main” (Moru language) service, with Paul our Principal interpreting. Here we are, setting off.

As it was All Saints Day, both of us preached on that theme, but in quite different ways – I took the opportunity to re-tell the history of the Sudan Episcopal Church and the great characters who had founded it and became the first national leaders. This was received with great enthusiasm and repeated bursts of applause, and was clearly understood as a message of encouragement – as I said, “we are all saints by baptism”.

After the services – and the farewell speeches, and the Bishop’s “encouragement” address, and the processing out, and shaking about 500 hands, and the final prayer in the Vestry, and the disrobing in the Dean’s office - Paul kindly took us to a small restaurant in Mundri for a light lunch. It was a bright sunny day, and sitting under a tin roof we became very warm – but it was a good time together. Here I am with Paul.



Then, about tea time, Bishop Bismark collected us from the guest house for an evening at his house (or, according to the sign-post, “Bishop’s Court”). This was some way out of town, on a bad stretch of road, but proved to be a spacious compound including also a number of tukuls (large huts), the buildings of “World Harvest Mission”, an American NGO concerned with water and sanitation, and community development. Four of the Mission members joined us and the Bishop’s family, with Paul and



Repent from the College, as we sat round an open fire outside and chatted, till the rain drove us inside. More conversation was followed by prayer, and then a beautiful meal – rice, sorghum chapatis, roast meat, stewed meat, fried cabbage and potato salad, with cake and fruit to follow – a real feast. After dinner there were speeches from all concerned, and then Andrew and I, unexpectedly, were presented with gifts – a pectoral cross in beadwork for Andrew, and a double length kitenge (fabric length) for me. What generosity! But it will be lovely to have something to remember this time.



Monday started with unaccustomed leisure, as we spent most of the morning packing, and re-confirming our Kenya Airways flights; but at 3.30 a smart white Suzuki (driven by the retired Commissioner for Mundri East) arrived to collect us for Communion and Leaving Party at the College. (We learned that Paul's minibus, so faithful over the last few weeks, had finally Died). At the College, the big Chapel, never renovated, had been opened, cleaned out and furnished with chairs – and fortunately it was dry, so holes in the tin roof didn't matter.

A number of friends were there – from the Guest House, World Harvest Mission, Bishop Bismark and Mrs Bishop, and several local dignitaries including the retired Commissioner for Mundri West. The Communion Service, including my sermon, took perhaps an hour and a quarter (here's another example of God's humour: invited to preach, I looked up the readings, and the Gospel reading started: "Jesus said, when you give a party"...). .... and then the speeches began. We finished with Bishop's blessing two and a half hours after the start! Andrew and I were each presented with a beautifully tailored outfit, complete with headgear, which we afterwards donned (to great hilarity) as you can see here, and the party got under way with more wonderful food and fruit including papaya and pineapple, on which I gorged. We presented "Salisbury Link" T-shirts to all the first year students, and left some as exam prizes for the second year; donated some items of clothing for students' families; and I presented Paul with a rainbow-coloured stole for special occasions. All too soon the ex-Commissioner swept us away in his Suzuki, and regretfully we returned to the guest house. It was hard to believe it was all over.



But it was not over yet. On Tuesday morning Bishop Bismark collected us for the air-strip, as we were flying out with Mission Aviation Fellowship, in a small, 10-seater plane. Arrived at the "Departure Terminal" (a large tree) we found Bishop Stephen of Lui and his wife, Alex from the guest house...and then Paul arrived from College, having walked most of the way and then taken a "boda-boda" (motor-bike "taxi"). So there were more loving farewells, and Bishop Stephen presented us with beautiful woven Lui baskets.

The plane arrived punctually, circled and landed; we boarded, various crates and boxes were loaded, and soon we were airborne and heading for Juba. It was an interesting flight, as we flew at about 7,000 feet, low enough to see the landscape very clearly – rivers, the Juba road...and not much else: the countryside was amazingly empty. I thought I could see the place where we had to ford the river on the way out – Jebel Luri – with the mountain behind (see right).



After about 45 minutes we landed in Juba. We managed to scrounge a lift from a friendly stranger to the ECS guest house, and booked in. The rest of the day was spent – as always at the ECS guest house – meeting and talking to interesting people doing amazing things in remote and strange places. In the evening we were invited to share a goat roast, being organised by a Dinka family for an Australian pastor, Tom, who had befriended their relative in Sydney when he first arrived in Australia as a refugee. It was delicious, though stewed goat entrails are not to everyone's taste.

So on Wednesday morning we were at the airport by 10, and took off for Nairobi, at 12.15; spent most of the day pottering around Nairobi airport or exchanging stories with Tom (who was returning to Sydney) in the coffee shop. The London flight left around midnight and by 05.15 we were at Heathrow...thank you, Sarah, for meeting us. So ended the "odyssey".

Some what are my lasting impressions? First, I think, of the overwhelming poverty of the country, and the absolute survival level at which many people still live: women were bringing five bunches of bananas or one bowl of cassava root to market, to earn one or two South Sudanese pounds (one pound = 15 pence). So much of the country is still infested with landmines – we saw at least three clearance teams – which prevents any cultivation, though the land is so fertile. This had a chastening effect on me – we have so much, the people we met had so little, and yet they were so kind and gracious.

The legacy of fifty years of civil war and oppression by a hostile government is that everyone has tales of horror and suffering to tell. Some of our students never went to school, because there was no teacher, or the school had been bombed; some with families never had their marriages blessed, because there was no pastor; many had fled into exile, and those who remained had faced bombing, looting, rape and torture, from Sudanese government troops. Yet we found no bitterness, no anger; just a matter-of-fact acceptance of the past, and a determination to build for the future.



This must be linked to the very strong Christian faith that inspired and upheld everyone we talked to. Our students, our friends at the guest house and elsewhere expressed their absolute trust in God, and their joy and hope in Jesus. They really lived their faith. Worship on Sundays was amazing –



incredibly vibrant (and noisy), with everyone singing at the top of their voice, and dancing where they stood, lifting arms, clapping – such joy and excitement. But at other times too, everything started with prayer, and often ended with the Grace, and in conversation God was almost a third party in the discourse. And this seemed to be embedded in their culture: we learned that during the civil war, when things were going badly, the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army) were reminded of their Christian faith, and began regularly to pray, worship and even take Holy Communion before a battle. From that

time, we were told, the tide of war began to turn in their favour...leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2008, and Independence in 2011. And they do thank God for their freedom.

We were also overwhelmed by the generosity and hospitality we encountered. On one occasion, led by Bishop Bismark and Paul the Principal, we arrived after dark at their friend's house, alerting him

only by a phone call half an hour before. We were offered tea, and a chance to wash hands and use latrine....and then a full scale supper was laid on for us. I suspect the women of the family went short that evening, but we were royally entertained. It seems to be instinctive to share whatever you have and to care for the guest first.

So, what Andrew had said before we went proved true – we learned far more than we taught, and it has made a deep impression on me. We found such a prayerful and trusting approach to life, such a spiritual depth of wisdom, that it was both challenging and humbling. I am deeply grateful to have had the experience. I feel I have made life-long friends, and am determined to do what I can to share what I learned, and to try to communicate something of the love, the joy and the faith I found in South Sudan.



Praise God for such a great experience!

Best wishes

Jane