

NEWSLETTER FROM SOUTH SUDAN 3

Mundri, 26 October 2013

Dear friends,

Greetings from Mundri, where we have now completed two weeks' teaching at Bishop Ngalamu Theological College, learned much more about the country and met some interesting people.



The guest house is comfortable, and we have enjoyed watching the birds that share it with us – some athletic house martins, some small pied wagtails, a flock of raven-like birds but smaller....and the resident vultures, who remind me of the Liverpoolian vultures in the “Jungle Book” film: “So what we gonna do then?” Here they are on the roof.

I was talking to Alex, the guest house manager – a very nice man and very competent, despite a completely laid-back demeanour. It seems he is the son of the ECS Provincial Secretary, John Agostino, whom we met in Juba. But he has stayed in Mundri, and he described some of the bad days during the civil war, when villages and churches were repeatedly bombed, crops destroyed, and people left destitute. Some days, he says, he had nothing to wear but an old grain sack with holes cut for arms and head. I am reading a book about the war called “Faith under Fire in Sudan”, and he shows me a picture of himself in the book, at the bridge we cross to the college, erecting a large cross with some friends. It is easy to forget what all the people we meet have been through, and not surprising to learn that many are deeply traumatised, and find it hard to raise the energy or motivation to pick up the threads of “normal” life and start working and taking responsibility.

The weather has been kind, allowing us a daily shower of rain most days to cool the air, but this means many mosquitoes, which need repelling: here is Andrew protecting his ears. We had more welcome visitors on Thursday night: two Government vehicles roared into the compound, disgorging a Minister, entourage, and bodyguard numbering, we gather, 23 in all – they had phoned only that afternoon to book accommodation, so Alex had been busy!



I had the opportunity to chat to the Minister over breakfast – a tall, young, slim man in a polo shirt, very well spoken: he explained that the Education Ministers of the three Equatoria states, being dissatisfied with the state of education (which indeed is dire: schools under trees, teachers low status and demotivated, national curriculum only just being established), have decided to undertake a personal inspection of schools, to look at teaching, management and organisation....and they have agreed to visit each other's states! This seems to me a remarkable example of trust, and lack of one-upmanship; and they clearly listen - Nico, a Dutch education adviser with MRDA living in our guest house, says that on a previous occasion he had the chance to brief them....and a suggestion he made then later emerged as an instruction from the Ministry.



Even our walk to work can be a social occasion – one morning we were joined by three small schoolchildren who greeted us, then confidently tucked their hands into ours and walked with us the half-mile to the main road, where they scampered off. We managed to take their picture then, but we have looked in vain for them since....

On Sunday we went again to the English service in Mundri Cathedral, were ushered to seats near the front but took no active part. A very good sermon was preached by a lay reader, starting from the feeding of the five thousand and, focusing on “resources” moving on to “mobilising resources” for the church’s work – so we had a rousing song and then an extra collection, to pay for more service books for the church. The cathedral is a fine building, recently renovated, with a generator to power a sound system, lights and fans – here is an exterior view Andrew took after the service.



When we emerged we chatted with two other expatriates – Americans working with World Harvest Mission. One of them, who has been here on and off since 2009, agreed she had seen changes, but not all good. The sudden return of up to 30,000 people of Mundri origin, expelled from (north) Sudan after Independence in 2011 has overwhelmed the local economy – not enough food, not enough housing, not enough pit latrines, an increase in malnutrition. More traders from other countries – Somali, Kenya, Uganda – have come in, with access to capital and materials that the locals can’t compete with, which leads to tensions. And there used to be a bank in Mundri, but it failed and closed, so now there is nothing – only some people keen to buy your dollars. So although the local discourse is of hope, determination, promise, it is a long hard struggle. The land is so fertile, there should be masses of food...but not all the mines have been cleared, and even money for tools and seed is not there for many people. We are eating local bananas and papaya, but apparently even some of the oranges are trucked up from Uganda.



Also outside the Cathedral we met several of our students who have attended the English service...and one, Repent, is about to start his Sunday School class for the Arabic congregation! It reminds me that although some students struggle with English, they have other languages and other gifts which are truly impressive. Here he is with part of his class under the tree (occupying the benches of the “old” Cathedral).

On return to the guest house we found another visitor, Katharine, a health advisor with one of the big NGOs, who knows all about the health system here. So I learned about the Primary Health Care Units and Centres, and the inadequacy of Lui Hospital, 15 miles down the road

(originally a mission hospital, now the only Government hospital for a very long way). She commented favourably on the ECS clinic in Maridi, which she knows – though in very cramped premises, it does good work. She also described Maridi as “a pretty town” and says we must try to get to see the dam – which presumably powers the electricity and water supply in the town (this is sophistication indeed!).

On our way back to the guest house, very close to our gate, we passed a centre of loud singing, preaching and praying, clearly another church, and with a BIG sound system. Over the coming week we learned that this is a new church, with some name like “New Life”, and that it is to have its official opening on Thursday, all other churches in Mundri have been invited, visiting preacher, big feast planned. Paul (College Principal) was invited so he told us all about it. Well. The preparations started on Wednesday evening, so there was VERY loud singing and music and preaching all evening until 12.15 in the night. It seemed to be right



opposite our windows, so no chance of sleep. Then, on Thursday, we escaped to College but the celebrations continued all day, were continuing when we returned around 5 p.m. (when Andrew took a quick photo through the fence), and continued all through the night, finally ceasing just after 7 a.m. on Friday morning when we were already struggling up and preparing to teach. Two nights without sleep meant our teaching was a bit like wading through treacle....and I was amazed at the zeal, energy, stamina and devotion of these Christians!

And so we come to our teaching. The students are much more relaxed with us now, and talk more freely and ask more questions. English is still a big issue – when we read a Bible passage with them we will read round the class, one verse each, and stop at the end to ask about difficult words.....and there are so many! Even short words like “dew” and “vow” can cause difficulty, let alone “iniquity” or “intercession”. More and more I realise the NIV is not the best Bible for them, as it makes no concessions to ease of reading. Good News Bible (GNB) is better, and one student has an “Easy To Read” Bible (American, I think), which is similar but even more straightforward. How to get enough GNB versions here??

The teaching continues to be quite intensive, and Andrew is amazed when Paul remarks quite casually, that we are doing a whole semester’s teaching (4 months) in three weeks, in the subjects we are teaching. And we are now thinking seriously about setting the exams – for, yes, there will be an exam in each topic. I break this to the first year students on Friday....consternation! “Will you give us a hand-out?” No, you have your own notes (from the blackboard and oral teaching) and your memory...and you can always study the books in the library (which is not bad on biblical texts and books). I think we have guaranteed close attention to teaching next week....

In Paul’s absence on Monday (we learn later he was conducting prayers for the first anniversary of his mother’s death) I volunteer to teach a session on Christian Ethics, which is fascinating. After setting out various frameworks (rule-based, virtue based, situation-based, utilitarian) I suggest some case studies. We discuss first polygamy – what does an evangelist do on encountering a community where all the men have several wives? Then we move on to the war – when is it right to stay, in solidarity with the people but at risk, and when is it right to flee? This elicits some vivid and heart-rending stories from the students, and I contribute

General Gordon at Khartoum, and the story of the film “Of Gods and Men” (Catholic brothers under attack in Algeria). It’s a good time of sharing.

This College site was originally occupied by Bishop Gwynne Theological College (and was called “The Village of God”), but they twice had to flee when the site was bombed, strafed and invaded by troops who trashed everything. The College site is still largely ruined buildings; the only ones restored (with Australian help) are the central building with classrooms and library (see last week’s picture), and the pit latrines behind it (see right). The Principal, Paul himself lives in an unrestored building, “camping” along with six students. A guest house is partly renovated and will be completed by the Australian work-party in the New Year. The Chapel still has a roof but is not used for worship.



We had an unexpected visitor on Wednesday at College – the newly-elected Bishop of the Sudan Pentecostal Church, in purple polo-shirt and baseball cap, roared up on his motor bike and greeted Paul warmly. It seems he has been working as evangelist and pastor in the Nuba Mountains (an active war zone, so very dangerous and heart-breakingly poor).....and then was called for the elections of a new Bishop and unexpectedly found himself elected. He is delightful, very energetic, now visiting his many congregations in some quite

inaccessible places, and totally committed to the Lord. It was good to be aware of the many different church groups active here – and even better that they do work together, and the Sudan Council of Churches is active. Paul kindly took our photo with him.

A new experience for us this week was the Wednesday afternoon Fellowship meeting. This turned out to be ASB Evening Prayer, led by a student, with songs and a sermon – Andrew preached this week, my turn next week. It was announced during the service that next week “we” will resume the normal pattern of fasting on Wednesdays until after Fellowship (about 3.30 p.m.) Afterwards Andrew and I, with a gulp, agreed that we shall have to participate, so no lunch that day. They seem to abstain also from water when fasting (following Muslim practice) but I am convinced this is not what God intended, and anyway we would find it really hard to teach “dry”. The Fellowship meeting ended, as all worship services end, with the leaders and other clergy processing out and forming a line, and everyone shaking hands down the line and joining the end of it, as they came out. We ended up standing in a square in the porch of the college building, and joining hands for the Grace, which is lovely. See picture (taken as the last students were still shaking hands).



So now you are up to date – there is so much more I could tell, but it will have to wait for another occasion. In summary, we are well, enjoying ourselves, working hard, and conscious that there is only one more week of teaching and SO MUCH to pack in! Thank you for your prayers, your interest, and to some of you, for your supportive emails, which are much appreciated.

With every blessing,
Jane