

SOUTH SUDAN NEWSLETTER NO.4

Mundri, 30 October 2013

Dear friends

This is the last letter I shall write from South Sudan, although there may be a final “reflective note” after I return to Wiltshire. This last week has been pretty packed, so I can only include highlights.

After I had sent the last letter on Saturday last, we prepared for a special day on Sunday: We were invited by the Bishop of Lui (next Diocese, 15 miles away but an hour’s journey) to attend the ordination of deacons and priests in his Cathedral, and for one of us to preach. We tossed for it, and Andrew was the lucky one. Paul Issa (College Principal) arranged for us all (he and the Vice-Principal Repent Abraham also came) to go in his aged rickety minibus, accompanied by eight students – four already ordained, four not, but I think he chose strong people (one woman) who could push the bus if necessary. Well, we got about two thirds of the way to Lui and – BANG! – a back tyre exploded. You can see the damage in this picture.



Amazingly we had a spare, and even more amazingly it was airtight and inflated, although showing hemp stitching from an earlier repair; the jack finally worked, and after only about forty minutes we were bumping along the road again, with the students singing wall-to-wall hymns (I was praying just as hard but more quietly)...and we reached the Cathedral with ten minutes to spare before the service. The whole procession was already lined up under the trees waiting for us.

The service was impressive, especially for the loud and joyful singing (with plenty of drums and maracas), the number of people in special robes (all the choir, the Mothers Union, the Youth Group, not to mention all the Archdeacons, the Chancellor, Bishop, Dean and sundry clergy)...and the heat. Lui Cathedral seats about 600 and was completely full; it has an iron sheet roof with no false ceiling and no fans, so the sun-warmed tin radiated heat gently as the sun grew in strength...



the poor Bishop, in full robes, was seen to mop his brow frequently, and bottled water was distributed at one point to all of us in the sanctuary. The action was clearly well rehearsed, and the licensing of three lay readers, ordaining of four new deacons, and priesting of nine deacons went very smoothly – Andrew and I, together with Paul and Repent, were able to join in laying hands on some of the new priests, including – much joy for Paul – a graduate of Bishop Ngalamu College – second from the left in this picture.

Andrew then preached, and Paul interpreted (the whole service was in the local Moru language, though I recognised some English hymn tunes) - he spoke to the ordinands' wives and families as well as the individuals (there was one woman among the deacons), and it must have been appreciated because at the Bishop's house afterwards the Mothers Union co-coordinator, an elderly lady in a dog-collar, said to him "You preach like an African" ...and it was clearly meant as a compliment!

Holy Communion followed, and the whole congregation was communicated, the new priests and deacons moving smoothly to four stations; communion was a traditional wafer dipped in a wine glass of wine, delivered into the hands. And so, finally, after three and a half hours ("the shortest



we've ever had it", said the Dean) the procession wound its way out of the Cathedral and circled a large tree till we were all standing in a large circle two deep, and I was invited to say the final prayer (see left). Then Andrew, Paul, Repent and I were invited to join the Bishop in his house (mercifully relieved of his robes, and looking much younger and happier), where we enjoyed cold water and then an excellent meal with his family....while the students were left to the tender mercies of the Dean.

The Bishop, learning of my interest in mission hospitals, then offered to give us the tour of Lui itself and of the Hospital – the only one between Maridi and Juba, so serving well over half a million population. The students were allowed to go back in the minibus (yes, they made it safely), while we had the tour. We started with the Cathedral – three times demolished or badly damaged by the Sudan Air Force during the 50 year civil war (or Sudan's campaign of genocide and Islamisation, whichever you prefer); the foundations of the first Cathedral are still visible outside.

Then, the grave of Dr Kenneth Fraser, who with his wife came to Lui in 1920, built a hospital, a school and a church, translated the Bible into Moru and stayed till his death in 1935. He selected likely candidates from the school, trained them as medical orderlies and teachers, and sent them out in pairs, to set up clinics and schools and to conduct worship, in outlying places. It is generally reckoned he is responsible for the fact that this area ("Moruland") has more educated people, and has produced more doctors and other professionals, than any other part of South Sudan.

Then we had to stop at the old tree, "Laro" (see right) which had been the slave-traders' meeting point, thus very bad associations, but Dr Fraser made it the first centre of worship and laid to rest all the demons. The remains of benches show that the Sunday School still meets here.



And so to the hospital, with good buildings, well supported by CUAMM (Italy) and Samaritans Purse: about 110 beds, separate maternity wing with delivery suite and direct connection to operating theatre; nursing school, with a new building scheduled to open in the New Year; outpatients currently meeting under a tree while the OPD building is renovated (we met the clinical officer conducting his clinic); functioning latrines and a new incinerator. It has its own borehole for water, and several generators....for where it is, i.e. a small trading centre miles from anywhere, it is pretty good.



Here's a view of the main ward block (sorry about the foreground), and you can just see part of the clinic being held under the tree. After this, Bishop Stephen gave us tea and kindly drove us all back to Mundri in his own vehicle (nice Land Cruiser, donated by Diocese of Lund in Sweden), and we were very happy to relax on our verandah. What a day!

After all that, returning to the teaching routine of 6 hours' classes on Monday was a bit of an effort – but the students were cheerful and much more relaxed with us now, asking lots of questions; and I think their English reading is improving: I told them so and it went down well. It's hard to believe this is now our last week of teaching and each day we are "signing off" subjects – though not without warning them there is an exam to come, and suggesting how they might revise for it. The time has been very short – in my last session on Primary Health Care I scampered through the Expanded Programme of Immunisation, Disease Prevention, Essential Drugs, and Mother and Child Health care – did you know South Sudan has a Maternal Mortality Rate of 2054 per 100,000 live births? Even Chad, the next worst country, has "only" 1100. In Old Testament Poetic Books we whizzed through Proverbs (yawn) and Song of Songs (yum yum) in two hours.



My Liturgy session on Marriage proved very interesting. We discussed bride price – how can a young man raise 400 cattle to pay for his bride? Then we got on to the subject of who had had their marriage blessed in church and who hadn't....and I sort of gathered without directly asking, that of the seven married students present, hardly any had had their marriages blessed in church...usually because of the chaotic conditions of wartime. It transpired that this could be a problem for them: a pastor whose marriage has not been blessed is barred from blessing other marriages; and the children

of an "unblessed" marriage may be refused baptism, certainly in this Diocese and the next. I mentioned this to Paul, who recognised the issue, and told us that the previous generation of BNTC students, finding themselves in this position, had their wives/husbands come to College just the week before graduation.....and they went over to the Cathedral and had a mass blessing-of-marriages. No big party, which freed them from the worry of cost, just tea and biscuits back at College; but then they were all properly set-up for their ministry. So I fed this back to the students, who looked very interested and hopeful – I hope they follow it up.

The next day, in the final Liturgy class, we had a mutually rewarding exchange of information on funeral and burial customs. It seems the church is only involved if the deceased is a lay reader, Mothers Union member or pastor; otherwise there may be no Christian rite at all, though the pastor may go as a "good neighbour" and help to dig the grave. It is usual for the body to be buried in the family compound, not necessarily in the middle, perhaps in an area at the side – though our Dinka student, Abednego, is definite that his tribe bury the body actually in the house. If the floor gets too crowded, you move the house – it's just poles, woven twigs, mud and thatch, after all. I was informed that in one tribe, near Maridi, the custom has been for the women to begin the mourning by taking off all their clothes and running about the compound wailing and stark naked. Paul commented that this was very embarrassing for the pastor when he came. Students assured me this custom is becoming much less common.

Our teaching completed, we thought about the exam papers – and students, predictably nervous, asked for complete printed hand-outs, not getting much response from me, though Andrew has given a few. I said “you have your notes and your memory, and there are books in the Library”. I hope they will be OK, though some of the slower students in English may not have got the whole picture.

We negotiated the day off on Friday, because I promised to visit Maridi and Bishop Justin kindly arranged for us to be fetched in his own car. His driver Peter and our escort Revd Martin rolled up about 10, and we set off for Maridi – a three hour journey, and a very bumpy ride, though everyone assured us this main road is excellent, compared with the minor roads. But we arrived at the Maridi



ECS Guest House in good order, just too late to join in All Saints Day prayers in the Cathedral (which is dedicated to All Saints) – the pastors were gathered with the Bishop and Mama Joyce awaiting us (see left). Greetings, prayer, introductions, brief speeches and then we all had lunch together. Most of the pastors were from parishes in Maridi Town, and some had Diocesan responsibilities, such as the Church Land Officer – having seen the extent of the church estate, and the lack of fencing, I saw why this was needed.

I had really come to meet the students at Chaima Christian Institute who are “returnees” from other countries and are being sponsored, by Heytesbury, to learn English. They were not at Chaima but Lynn Treneary, a CMS short term mission partner who was here to teach English, rounded up four and brought them to the guest house. So, as soon as decently possible, I left the lunch table to have a chat with them (see right). Two returned from Congo, one from Khartoum, and one came in from the village, having never had any education. From our brief conversation it was clear they still had a long way to go in English, but Lynn is enthusiastic and persevering, so I’m sure they will get there.



After an hour for rest (very welcome!) Bishop Justin took us on a guided tour of church property – the William Haddow Primary School, and later the



Secondary school; the Bethsaida Clinic, where a mother was in process of delivering in the labour room, but we view the other areas; several “residential areas” (compounds of thatched huts, some of which are occupied by people displaced from their own land by LRA attacks, and not yet confident enough to go home); the Cathedral, of course, where we found the Choir practising, and stopped to listen and to introduce ourselves and pray for them (see left); and finally the Chaima Christian Institute. Revd Eli and Revd Titus took us round, and I presented them and Bishop with Salisbury Link T-shirts, and some dollars towards another student sponsorship (see next page). We watched a computer class in progress – they have internet access, but it costs \$3,000 a year which is a very heavy burden. The Institute is surrounded by well-cultivated fields: Bishop explained that the first

requirement for the theological students is to learn to cultivate enough to feed themselves – so the first year of study they have to come alone, and grow enough food to enable them to bring their

wife to live with them in the 2nd and 3rd year. The maize is 6 feet high – it’s the second crop this year, and if you are active you can get 3 crops a year. The Institute has demonstration plots of beans, maize and pineapples – later we got four pineapples in the market, so they must grow well here.



Here is the presentation to Chaima staff and Bishop (Bishop in blue shirt). We also visited the rather overgrown airstrip, and were charmed by the “Maridi Passenger Terminal”, a tin shack ... but it was at least a building, more than the tree that was shown us on the Mundri air strip. Last stop on the tour was the National Institute for Health Training - I was delighted to find that this is the national centre for training clinical officers, registered midwives and public health officers, and that the buildings are well-kept, and lots of students are visible. It’s supported by AMREF so the training will

be good quality.

Bishop returned us to the guest house for our supper and overnight stay...and we immediately walked into a birthday party, being given by an American family based at the guest house and engaged on language-learning in order to translate the Bible into two of the three remaining languages in Maridi, without their own Bible. They have clearly settled in for the long term and are quite comfortable – the wife, Rhianna cooked an excellent chocolate cake (in a tin over a hot plate) which we got to sample. We chatted to them most of the evening, and were quite impressed with how they have adapted to the local conditions....with two small boys, whom they will home-school. Here are the three huts they all live in.



I woke up early the next morning needing a loo – but knowing it meant a walk cross a dark compound to a dark latrine, I held on until it was light enough to find my way and fill my bucket of water (it’s a pour-flush, so at least there is a “throne” to sit on). Breakfast (tea, bread and margarine, bananas) was at 8.00, and almost immediately our friend Martin was there to take us to the market. We were told by Paul Issa that the Farewell for us on Monday will be a service followed by a party....and he requested us to buy fruit for the party – enough for 60! – in Maridi, known for good fruit. So, in the market (great fun, full of bustle and colour) we bought roughly 120 bananas (10 bunches), 30 oranges and four pineapples (all we can



find) – and it cost us, or Paul, 59 South Sudanese pounds – about £9 sterling. We also bought fruit for our own consumption, including a papaya (paw-paw) for 2 SSP or 30 pence.

Finally we proceeded to the Bishop’s own house for “tea” before we leave. “Tea” is never just tea, so we settled down, after some chat, to roast chicken joints, chapattis, cooked cabbage, rolls...and a delicious bowl of fruit, which proved to include tangerines! It was a leave-taking but with several others present, including a very interesting Korean missionary who also



does acupuncture and thinks it may treat the nodding disease, which is common here among children.



By 11.00 it was time to leave Maridi, with hugs and handshakes and thanks all round. So we took to the road again for the three-hour return journey, in Bishop's Land Cruiser. It was as bumpy as we remember and Andrew (on the bench seats in the back this time) needed to retire to bed on our arrival to recover. But we have had a marvellous trip, with very generous hospitality, and all our purposes have been accomplished, with grace and good will. Praise God!

Now we are within sight of the end of our trip. Tomorrow each of us is to preach in Mundri Cathedral – Andrew at the English service, me at the “main” (Moru) service, with Paul interpreting. So I have to write out my exact words in fair copy so that Paul can read it over beforehand. That's tonight's task. Tomorrow evening Bishop Bismarck has invited us to his house for dinner; and then on Monday we have the Farewell Service and Party at the College. On Tuesday (morning, probably) we fly with MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) to Juba, and stay in the ECS Guest House again; and on Wednesday we embark on the marathon journey home with Kenya Airways, via Nairobi to Heathrow. Andrew's long-suffering wife Sarah has kindly agreed to collect us (0530 on Thursday), so I hope to be back home later on Thursday morning. And will probably sleep the clock round!

Thank you for your interest and your patience in reading all this.....and for sharing this memorable adventure with us.

With every blessing

Jane