

REFLECTIONS FROM SOUTH SUDAN – ANDREW POPPE – 19 October 2013

Jane and I have been here in Mundri for one week now, and have just come to the end of our first week of teaching. I think I can speak for both of us when I say that it has been something of an adventure. Personally I must start with the temperature. On a cool day we are talking late 20's and humid. On a hot day we are late 30's and more humid. It is still taking me time to acclimatise! At night we get as low as 20 degrees. As we have discussed on several occasions, the early experience has been something of a culture and climate shock, though I think I am coming to terms with it now!

We arrived in Mundri on Thursday a week ago at 11pm after a 9 hour journey over some of the most challenging roads I have seen. The Mundri road is the main East-West highway. It is often, in the wet season which is just coming to an end, impassable with quite the biggest holes I have seen. All is not helped by the 40 tonne trucks that must use the road to get around the country.



On Friday the 11th we were driven over to Bishop Ngalamu Theological College to both find our way and to meet the staff and students. We had a very pleasant morning introducing ourselves, learning a little of them, understanding that they are very keen to learn and having our first taste of the challenge of English for some of them. This day and the weekend showed me that whilst there are many languages here (Moru is prevalent because we are in 'Moruland') English, however well spoken or not, is the language of communication. It is the national official language. We find that the standard greeting is "Hello, how are you", reply "I am fine, how are you", "I am fine". We have been trying to learn a few Moru greetings, it seems only fair!

On Friday afternoon we were privileged to be invited to the compound of Bishop Bismark's wife's family to sit with them and share in their grief for the loss of a child who had died a few days before in Lui hospital. We sat with them, mostly in silence, for about 2 hours, only shaking hands with family members coming and going through the afternoon. We shared Tea with them, made in their traditional way (no milk and lots of sugar, which I managed to shy away from) and finished our time with prayers for a child and the family. The whole event was very moving and touching. During the afternoon there was a commotion and a scream. Another of the family children, out playing, had got some sort of ligature round her neck and was strangling. The adults moved very fast to help and the little girl was saved. Certainly I felt that life is difficult enough here, and can become a disaster any moment. We came back to the Guesthouse somewhat quietly.



On Saturday we had the day off. We took ourselves into Mundri town; well, to the main street and the little market. It had rained the night before and, with no tarmac, it was very muddy underfoot. Mundri centre seems very entrepreneurial with lots of little tin shack shops, many selling mobile phone cards and accessories (everybody has a mobile phone). In the market they sell a few fruit and vegetable items and the staple maize,

sorghum and cassava. It reminds me very much of an African version of the Wild West one street frontier town. I took a few photos and we bought one or two items to make life a little easier at the MRDA (Mundri Relief and Development Association) Guesthouse where we are staying. We spent the rest of the day settling in to our accommodation.

On Sunday we had been invited to the English service at the Cathedral at 08.30, followed by the main Moru service at 10.30. The English service was relatively standard for what we know, but the South Sudanese singing of English songs and hymns we know was a real treat. I have recorded snatches of music. We were asked to stand and introduce ourselves during the 'notices' section (which took some 10 minutes!) The service lasted some one and a half hours, which passed very quickly and was followed by the Moru service, which lasted 3 hours! Notwithstanding that we cannot speak Moru and so could understand little, some was translated for us so we could follow the structure of the service of the word. The sermon lasted 40 minutes, and notices some 15 minutes. Notices, in the middle of the service, is a very important time of communication with the wider public from the church organisations.

We were again asked to stand and introduce ourselves at the point in the service when all new attendees and returnees stand and tell who they are and where they have come from or have been. We tried a little Moru we had learned and had on a crib sheet, which went down very well. Also, I was asked to give my full name by Paul Issa (the Principal of the Theological College and our translator). He then used a miss-pronunciation to suggest that they had the Rev'd Pope in the Cathedral. Well, certainly the congregation and the Bishop laughed! However, the following evening two young lads came into the Compound and asked for the Bishop to the Americas who their Mother, who had been in church, had said was here! Very funny.



Another moment that has stuck in our memories was the Duck that was given as part of one of the collections (there were several collections). The Duck sat, wrapped in a plastic bag with just its head showing, looking rather forlorn and fed up. I took a photo. A few days later (Wednesday), Paul Issa invited the head of the MRDA HQ (whose name is Light) to lunch with us at the College, and we had Duck, yes, the same creature. So I have seen and photographed the Duck as an offering, then we ate it!

The other highlight of the Moru service was the truly wonderful African singing, so full of power and joy, even if we could not understand a word. The local Sunday School also came in to sing (more than 80 of them!) And there were 460 in the congregation, with standing room only at the back of the Cathedral - wonderful. Afterwards, we processed out with the Bishop and clergy and stood in line to shake 460 hands (plus many interlopers, I think).



On Monday Jane and I rose to another red hot day to walk the 1/2 hour to the College. We arrived as the students finished their early devotions. These happen first followed by their first lesson (2 hours) before break, which includes their breakfast. We, luckily, have our breakfast before we set out! Our first lessons were a real treat and a real eye opener. English is the language of study but many of the words of theological study are a real challenge in English. However, we have discovered that our charges are mainly better educated than we might have been led to believe, and they can ask some searching questions. The only stumbling block is the English, spoken but especially read (I have to remind myself that I cannot speak either Moru or Dinka at all (2 main languages in the classes).

For our first day I taught for 6 hours, and again on the second day. It was good to recognise that I teach a little

less on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday! On Thursdays the students have the afternoon for manual work. They decide what they are going to do from gardening through to road repairs, which is what they have done this week to make the road into the college passable. We have been stuck in a 4X4 on that road already. They spent the afternoon filling the biggest holes with chunks of rock they dug out of the ground (so much for ministerial training, at least it is a service they provide for all users! Good for Deacons!)

My reflections of the week are many, but perhaps the greatest is the level of hope I find among the people in some very difficult circumstances. They are happy to talk about the Civil War, and even more so about what the government should do to better the country now that it is safe (mainly improve the roads). But there is a steady optimism for the future, which firmly includes the central place of the Church in any development. The 'lived out' faith is wonderful to experience. God goes with everyone everywhere and church services are just an extension of the life of faith, praise and hope that is a core part of life here. I just note that the locals remember the College before the Civil War when it was large and thriving (and called The Bishop Gwynne College, which is now in Juba), and they knew the area as the Village of God.

Until next time, God bless, and your prayers for The Bishop Ngalamu Theological College and all South Sudan would be very welcome.