

140. Dubious Assumptions

Last week, I went to the Juba airport to catch a flight to Yambio for our student graduations. All appeared okay as I approached the check-in counter. It proved to be a dubious assumption. *'Oh, Yambio. Your flight is cancelled. There is a problem with the plane'*. I missed the graduation. A few days earlier, I had attended the graduations of the Senior Four, Loreto students who were expecting to do their final exams next week (in relatively the same week as they have been held in previous years). Another dubious assumption! Last Thursday, 20th November, the Ministry of Education in Juba issued a circular announcing the exams will take place in the second week of January, 2105. The staff and the girls are about to depart for the long annual vacation, which occurs in January and February in South Sudan? What do you do, with so little notice?

Recently, Brother Denis attended a conference run by the Ministry of Education. During one session, when the Ministry of Education pay scale was presented, Denis asked why it was that a driver was paid at level 9 and teachers at the much lower levels of 12 to 14? No-one answered immediately but one official came to Denis at the next break and said: *'I was going to answer your question. Drivers have a lot of skills you know.'* There are some questionable assumptions about teachers implied in that response.

This week I am in Wau – my flight did take place today – for the graduation of the students in our Catholic Health Training Institute. I taught these students English and Ethics for three weeks when they first arrived just over three years ago. I recall asking various questions in that class as I endeavoured to get to know them. When I asked one young man what was the best thing that had happened to him, he replied: *'The day I married my wife. We have two children and my family make me so happy'*. I replied; *'That's good'*. He responded: *'Yes it is so good I can't wait to get another one'* – he meant a second wife and family, not another child! His assumptions and mine about what was *'good'* did not correspond!

One of our tutors, an astute Sister, asked her class to split into groups. It so happened that one group contained women only. One of the men in the class got up to join the all-female group remarking, helpfully he thought, *'I better join that group. They won't know how to think by themselves.'* Needless to say, the tutor corrected him on his false assumption!

On another occasion, I was teaching Science to a first year teacher training class at Loreto. In the Science curriculum, it points out some incorrect South Sudanese cultural assumptions such as the taboo on pregnant women eating egg yolks – supposedly harmful to the foetus. Later in the class, I asked: *'Are there any cultural customs you would like to see changed?'* *'Yes,'* replied Victoria, a very bright student: *'We should be able to pick our own husbands'*. One of the men in the class immediately responded: *'That would never work!'* The same man later abandoned his job at Loreto when he was told he would have to serve out his own food and not expect the female teachers to do it for him! One can confuse assumptions with genuine convictions! There are many assumptions that appear very dubious to me but are convictions for some here in South Sudan: polygamy is fine; men don't cook or eat re-heated food – that is only for women and children.

Of course, it is also easy for people outside of South Sudan, when they read reports of tribal fighting and deaths, to make the false assumption that we are in great danger here. Life is actually very normal and safe in the parts of the country where we are. Another annoying assumption made by some banks is that South Sudan is part of Sudan and therefore subject to financial sanctions. Dubious assumptions are hard to change once they have become convictions.

- Br Bill