62. Expectations and Events

Much of world attention seems to have focussed this week on the referendum in Southern Sudan. Since the CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement) was signed in January, 2005, the United Nations and a plethora of Non-Government Organisations have poured billions of dollars into Southern Sudan. Why?

Africa is one of the richest regions of the world in terms of natural resources. Yet many of the countries of Africa, Southern Sudan among them, have endured torrid conflicts and living standards among the lowest in the world, as measured by western economic indicators. Undoubtedly, many of the former colonial powers have been guilty of exploiting the riches of Africa for their own benefits. No wonder that the great Protestant African missionary, Albert Schweitzer (1875 – 1965) proclaimed:

"A heavy guilt rests upon us for what the whites of all nations have done to the coloured peoples. When we do good to them, it is not benevolence - it is atonement."

This week the referendum voting in almost all regions has been peaceful. The media has reported the significant deaths in Abyei but there has been surprisingly little violence elsewhere and good-natured optimism is the spirit of this time. Unfortunately, guns, the white man’s ‘gift’ to Africans, are to be seen in abundance and any disagreement has the potential rapidly to escalate into terrible conflict and slaughter. In this part of Sudan, the so-called, ‘Arrow Boys’, a citizens’ militia formed to combat the guerilla attacks of the LRA (Lord’s Resistance Army), are armed with guns, not bows and arrows.

Be it through motives of benevolence or atonement, the world community is right to make every effort to promote continuing peace in all African nations. But it would be a mistake not to try to maintain some of the enduring values of these cultures which are so different from our own.

Last Friday, Sr Margaret Scott and I were about to leave Riimenze to go to Yambio (about 30 kms) when one of the local teachers, Simon, came to Sr Joanna requesting help for his wife, Eva. Without the aid of a doctor, in her tukul with clay floor, mud-brick walls and grass roof, Eva had given birth the day before, to a tiny but healthy infant. Eva, however, was bleeding significantly and was suffering from a low blood count.

Sr Margaret skillfully drove our four-wheel drive vehicle down narrow bush tracks to the compound where Simon and Eva lived with their family. Sr Joanna assessed that Eva needed to go to hospital but Eva did not want to go. I was struck by the tremendous sense of belonging, of being secure in one’s own place that Eva and her family possessed. To my eyes, the circumstances in which they lived seemed poor but the bonds were very strong.

The hospital, nonetheless, could offer life-saving care and Eva was eventually persuaded to go with us to the Yambio Hospital. Some relatives also had to go with her to cook for her and look after her while she would be in hospital. That is the system here. I guess there are plusses and minuses to such an arrangement but better health care is undoubtedly one blessing bought by white people to Africa. Improving roads is another positive. Breakdown of traditional structures and family bonds are largely negatives.

The difficulty is knowing when to accept cultural expectations and when to try to change them. Some are obvious – accept the rights of others, improve the opportunities for women and girls, and turn away from violent conflict resolution. But it is less clear how to set such expectations without disrupting the social order. In the likely event of secession, establishing an egalitarian society without a dominant black elite, is a problem that has previously confounded many other emerging African nations. It would be good to be free of the threat of imposed Islamic sharia law
but not good to become a society which is secular, hedonistic or destructive of family life. There is also the danger that some have unreal expectations that secession will bring immediate improvement in living standards. The first steps this week are going well but it would be foolish to think the path ahead will not have some potholes. May God guide us down right paths.

- Br Bill

Local Children with Fr. Joseph in Juba
Frequent Small Visitor with Sr. Cathy

Fr. Alberto the Chef

Congolese Mother in Camp
Referendum Voting in Riimenze

Sr. Margaret & Sr. Josephine
Watching the voting

The Voters
Sr. Joana with Patient

Sr. Felista