80. Rain on the Roof

It is only the relatively modern houses in South Sudan, which have galvanised iron or zinc-aluminium roofs. Most people still live in the traditional grass-roof tukuls. Tiled or slate roofs may exist somewhere but I don’t recall seeing them although I have seen roofs that are made from concrete. Those who live in tukuls with grass roofs never hear the drumming sound of rain on a metal roof. I am told one hears many other sounds – the movements of geckos or rats, the rustle of leaves, the dripping of rain into puddles, the unwelcome buzzing of mosquitoes.

I think there is something comforting about the sound of rain on the roof when one is snuggled up warmly, sheltered from the wild moods of nature. Flashes of lightning followed by rolls of thunder are not threatening when one is securely inside. Most well made tukuls don’t leak but I wonder whether the sounds of a storm, inside a tukul, are comforting or threatening. Occasionally, I have heard gunfire at night. Locked in our house I have felt fine. How would I feel in a tukul? How would lightning and thunder make me feel in a tukul? I don’t really know.

Maybe if I were dark-skinned the night would bring a special sense of security. One could simply disappear into the blackness. I know in this society in the day-time my whiteness stands out. Being different in appearance from everyone else can seem to be a problem but it has been brought to my attention that it is more often the other African peoples – most commonly Kenyans, Ugandans, Congolese, Ethiopians - who are more likely to be hassled than we white ‘kawadjas’. Acceptance and security are always issues wherever there are mixed races of people coming together. I see myself as giving my life to help the people here but maybe the local people see me as a ‘have’ while they are ‘have-nots’.

Children, as always, give honest reactions. I delight in shaking hands with the small, and not so small, children. One gets the impression that they think it a special event to shake a white hand. Maybe it will affect their own hands! But while I reflect and muse on what makes one secure, accepted, wanted, I know there is one frustration above all blocking acceptance – language. I am sure that to be fully accepted one must be able to talk to the local people in their own language. The early missionaries managed to do it. So have the three sisters I now live with in Riimenze. I stand there as the dumb mute while they greet and meet and laugh and enjoy.

So learn the language could be the answer. Yet I am faced with the fact that my older brain cells do not absorb and recall as well as they once may have. It is really not a problem, however, to anyone but myself. The sisters engage the people very well. I cook and they go out to care for the people! The statistics reveal the need. In this part of South Sudan the under five mortality rate is 192 per thousand: almost one child in five dies before the age of five. In contrast, the under five mortality rate in Italy is only 4 per thousand.
Recently, on a cool, wet night, a grand-mother appeared at our door to express great concern about her pregnant grand-daughter. So Sisters Joana and Josephine headed out into the night to assess the situation and minister what aid they could. Assisting pregnant teenagers is not on my list of qualifications! The best I could do was to offer the use of my good lantern torch. They returned with the news that the girl would be fine. The local people were reassured – and so was I that to be ready to heal the sick is indeed a beatitude, a wonderful gift.

So what am I doing here? It all comes back to ‘rain on the roof’, what it is that gives us security. No-one of us possesses all the gifts but together we are stronger. And this is the interesting paradox about ‘Solidarity with South Sudan’. Most of the participating religious congregations could not have envisaged being here on their own. But here we are, women and men together, from different lands and orders, finding strength and security to deliver vital assistance together to the people of this land. We shall walk with them until they can walk alone – and we shall walk together sharing the different gifts that each of us brings.

- Br Bill
Range of Participants

Srs. Betty Jenny, Pat & Margaret

Sr. Dorothy assisting Sr. Suzan

Sr. Joana makes a point

Sr. Maria Martinelli

The new Riimenze presbytery
Tukul roof – no nails

Workshop on AIDS