82. Simple but Strong

There was no priest available for mass last Sunday morning. So the communion service was led by the parish catechists. Gabriel, the senior catechist, preached the homily. He is known to be a man of strong faith and simple devotion to the Church he has served, for many years, including the years of war. The parish now has an active parish priest and a deacon – to be ordained in December – but they were absent from Riimenze this day at other mass centres of this large parish. So once again Gabriel led his people in prayer and worship with a full church as usual. Gabriel is esteemed as a decent, uncomplicated, honest man who deserves the respect he is shown as community catechist. Priests may come and go but he is always here with reassuring fidelity.

Here it is evident that the Church is the people of God. The Church building may be decrepit with windows missing, roughly finished and with hard, backless benches but the people unite in unquestioning faith. I find myself wondering how different it is from many first world countries where people have found all kinds of reasons to abandon their places among the people of God. Lasting marriages are built on simple fidelity in spite of personal failings. So too the people of God have many failings but why do so many no longer simply forgive and forget and continue to be strong in their belief?

In this society one can rediscover the simple joys of living because so little can be taken for granted. I find myself rejoicing at simple things – at the sound of thunder or the flash of lightning, on hearing falling rain or knowing mangoes or papaya, or tomatoes are in season. Such is the efficiency of first world production and distribution; very little food is strictly seasonal in modern supermarkets. If one is prepared to pay, it is possible to buy almost anything, anytime. But when one only gets fruit and vegetables when they ripen in the local gardens, life brings its own rhythm of simple joys. When I manage to buy carrots in the local market, I return home with a sense of exultant achievement!

We have no town power. So I rejoice when the generator starts easily. We are gratified when we can buy diesel or petrol, as we can now, but could not two weeks ago. I am gladdened when a re-filled gas bottle is returned from Juba so we don’t have to cook over charcoal. It is a triumph when one can buy potatoes and eggs. A cauliflower is a gift from heaven and even cabbage is a special treat. But are we suffering? No I think we enjoy the cycles of availability and the variety of seasonal living. I don’t have to invent a life of artificial satisfactions. Life itself creates a rhythm and brings satisfaction in simple ways, through simple events.

A possible outcome if we have all the things we want all the time is that we forget to celebrate simple gifts and look for something else to celebrate. And maybe another outcome is that some lose sight of the value of simple faith and develop an outlook that is too critical or cynical. Why did God make me? It is so easy to substitute other things, before the ‘knowing, loving and serving of God’, when everything is available all the time. Sometimes one has to be without to appreciate what we take for granted.

Here the people appreciate any kind of food and clean water when it is available. Life revolves around kids, and more kids, and kids nursing other kids. So it seems. But there is a simple joy in all of this. The only toys one sees here are bike wheels rolled along with a stick. The no-name clothing is often not much more than rags. Yes, there is too much illness flowing from lack of good hygiene but generally there is simple happiness and strength to be found in the fidelity of the people. No society is perfect. This one certainly needs more facilities and services; but to have too little is not necessarily a worse state than to have too much and to want even more.

- Br Bill
Around the pump

Br. Joseph & Fr. Mario at Makpandu

Br. Joseph speaks to class

Child care

Child carrying child

Crowded in with kids & beans
I wonder

Makpandu classroom

Sr. Joana going to visit the sick

Welcoming Br. Joseph

Who are you?