

Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: Visit to Chimoio, Mozambique, May 2009

As part of a sabbatical I travelled to Mozambique for a ten-day visit. It was an enthralling experience that has fired me up and I have returned with a longing to talk about this far-off country where 'Christ is playing in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his' (to borrow a phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins). Indeed, it is the dancing limbs and the lively faces that best tell the story and I was very pleased that I took a video camera. A written report can't do justice to the excitement of seeing brand new Anglican congregations in the first flush of their development. But I can at least describe my non-stop week.

I was based in the city of Chimoio in central Mozambique, a busy and increasingly affluent hub for provincial government, agriculture and business. An Anglican congregation was established here 25 years ago and now has a substantial church building dedicated to St Bernard Mizeki (a late 19th century African Anglican catechist martyred just across the border in neighbouring Zimbabwe). This is the mother church for a cluster of newer congregations (eight at present but increasing all the time) spread across the surrounding province of Manica with a radius of over 120km. This network of churches (or pastoral zone as they call it) is served by only two priests, both of whom are based in Chimoio: Fr Paulo Hansine (who is also the Archdeacon with four other clusters in three huge provinces to oversee, as well as being a part-time consultant ophthalmologist and skin disease expert!) and Fr Domingo (an experienced priest, recently transferred from a neighbouring cluster, who was instituted as parish priest in Chimoio on the Sunday I visited). In 2007 the Chimoio Pastoral Zone was formally linked with the Parish of St Luke's and Christ Church, Chelsea as part of the ALMA (Angola- London-Mozambique Association) diocesan link. I was visiting as a formal representative from Chelsea.

My first and last nights, however, were spent 40km up the road at a non-Anglican church project called Vila Maninga which is comprised of an orphanage, old-people's home, primary school and facilities for ministerial training conferences. I have been involved in this project for a long time and last visited 12 years ago when it was first being built. It was wonderful to now see it prospering with a happy family of 30 orphans. A handful of these kids have now gone on to board at technical college, while the rest attend the primary school with over 600 other children from the surrounding villages. Vila Maninga was set up and is run by a missionary couple called Frikkie and Juanita De Jager who themselves visited Chelsea earlier this year. It was inspirational to witness their care and affection for each person in need who comes their way, be they young, old or disabled. It was also good to see the fire-damaged homes fully repaired and upgraded thanks to our Parish Lent Appeal in 2007, as well as a new water-tower going up, again funded by a more recent collection in Chelsea.

The intervening six days were spent as a guest of the Anglican church, staying with friendly English-speaking hosts from the congregation in Chimoio who had a very smart home on the outskirts of the city. Each day Fr Paulo picked me up (often at 7.30am) in his 4x4. The itinerary was exhausting, visiting all nine churches plus a school and a leprosy project.

The first day, a Sunday, started with a 3.5 hour Eucharist at the main church in Chimoio. This was quite an occasion with visiting choirs boosting the fabulous home choir (essentially the youth group). Before, during and after the liturgy no opportunity is lost for striking up a new song, always with effortless harmony, accompanied by gentle drums and maracas, and often performed with exuberant dancing and clapping. By contrast, the liturgy is very ordered and Catholic in style, but that seems to blend very naturally with the extempore singing. The service was extended by Fr Domingo's Institution, an appeal by the youth group for funds and my sermon which had to be translated into Portuguese (I also felt obliged to punctuate it with some English songs!) But I got the impression that a normal service is at least two hours, with communion followed by opportunities for the fortunate to present gifts of thanksgiving and the sick to come forward for prayer and laying on of hands.

In any case, this mega-mass was followed by another 1.5 hours of presentations, first to Fr Domingo and his family and then to me. Each group in the congregation (Men's Guild, Mother's Union, Youth Group etc) has to be given an opportunity to process from the back of the church, singing as they go, and bringing up various gifts (wood carvings in this instance, but in more rural churches it was often tall sugar canes, bags of maize and even live chickens!). Finally, at 3pm we sat down for a very tasty lunch of chicken and rice.

During the week, I preached at three other eucharists, all patronal festivals (the feast of St Joseph being postponed a few days and the feasts of St Simon of Cyrene and St Mathias falling within the week – all of whom were the patron saints of one of the churches we visited, something of a happy coincidence since the trip hadn't be planned with this in mind!) Each followed the same pattern with a lengthy mass, exuberant singing and numerous presentations to both Fr Domingo (on his introductory tour) and myself, followed by the obligatory shared lunch of chicken and rice (or sadza, a maize-meal porridge, best eaten with fingers!) Even in the churches we visited without celebrating mass, the congregations still turned out in force, sang lots and made generous presentations.

Four of these satellite congregations are in substantial towns (Manica, Catandica, Gondola and the other side of Chimoio). The other four are in very rural and remote villages (Penha Longa, Mucudo, Pinanganga and Maforga). All have been established since 2002, some as recently as last year. It is interesting to note that these churches don't begin as part of a grand plan set out by Fr Paulo. Instead, they have a much more organic and haphazard

pattern of growth, dependent on where key members of the congregation happen to live or move to.

They have all been formed by two or three laypeople who have some sort of Anglican identity (often coming from Zimbabwe or Malawi) discovering each other in a particular town or village (often by meeting each other at the mother church in Chimoio). They then agree to meet in one of their houses and form a prayer group, inviting friends and neighbours. Once a small group has been established, a priest is invited to visit them, often spending 48 hours with them, singing and praying through the night. In time, the priest will appoint two or three catechists from within the group, with responsibility for leading worship, teaching and pastoral care. These catechists are given ten days of training per year. The priest will continue to visit on a monthly basis to celebrate the eucharist and support the catechists.

As the congregation grows they will move to a temporary building, either a disused Catholic church, a barn, or a purpose-built mud and stick structure with a thatched roof. They are often granted a plot of land by the local authorities since the Anglican church seems to be held in high regard. This land is used to grow cash-generating crops as well as provide a plot for building. In time, they will seek to raise enough funds to build more permanent brick church. This is the stage that most of the congregations are planning for.

The process also begins to multiply as these churches generate their own satellite house groups. So when I visited the church in the already remote village of Pinanganga, a youth group from a satellite house group had walked 30km the day before to attend the service and perform a very entertaining dramatisation of the annunciation, complete with a young male Mary in drag!

Seeing that each congregation seems to be attracting lots of people with no previous connection with the Anglican church, I asked Fr Paulo what reasons he would give for such growth. He was suitably modest, not mentioning his own very wise, capable and influential leadership. He is fantastic ambassador, equally at ease with high-ranking government officials and lowly subsistence farming villagers. His answer, however, was threefold.

Firstly, he talked about the liturgy and how the order of it contrasted with the countless small Pentecostal churches that have spread in recent years. I could quite see how the colourful mix of catholic ritual and exuberant singing contributes to an appealing sense of both holiness and joy.

Secondly, he mentioned the catholicity of the Anglican Communion. By this he means the sense of being part of a bigger network with an international identity and an external structure of authority. Again, this contrasts favourably with the new independent churches which are constantly splitting whenever personalities clash. But it is obviously a strength of the Roman

Catholic church as well. What the Anglicans seem to offer in contrast to the Romans is a very real 'fresh expression' of Christianity with all the excitement and freedom of being a new church, yet also part of a bigger organisation. I could begin to see why our parish link and my visit meant so much to them, since we represented this world-wide connection that obviously counts for a lot.

Thirdly, he stressed the fact that the Anglican church was seen to put its faith into action. The social programmes that they were heavily involved in included an HIV counselling and testing project, funded through Fr Paulo's contacts in the ministry of health. In most congregations the catechists doubled as HIV counsellors, a job that brought them a valuable income and a motorbike. But it also showed that the church cared for every person and was seen out in the community.

In the remote village of Pinanganga the congregation had been looking after a number of orphans in their own homes and supplying them with text books while at Primary School. When Fr Paulo visited Chelsea last year he explained that about 20 of these children had completed primary school but couldn't be funded by the congregation through secondary education. A member of the Chelsea congregation responded with a generous donation and now all twenty children are boarding at a technical school for three years where they study either agriculture, mechanics, building or carpentry. I visited the school and talked to a very happy bunch of teenagers who can't quite believe their luck!

In the town of Catandica, on the road north to Malawi, the church has grown through the inspirational work of a couple called Elizabeth and Peter who have a thriving horticultural business. Elizabeth visited Chelsea with Fr Paulo last year. She talked about the prison visiting undertaken by the Mother's Union. This led to a request by the government to provide training and work for prisoners on their farm so that when they are released they have various horticultural skills. This seems to be working well, so much so that during my visit there were thirty young male prisoners in the pews willingly joining in with the worship, accompanied by an armed guard! The next project is to build the new church with unskilled youngsters who will be taught the art of construction on the job and then given a set of tools to work for themselves.

Elizabeth impressed us so much on her visit to London that the congregations of St Luke's and Christ Church agreed to fundraise for a new grinding mill in Catandica, to be run by the Mother's Union as an income generating project. This was intended as a Christmas present but delays in the banking system meant that Elizabeth only had access to the funds on April 24th. To my amazement, she was ready to unveil an almost complete brick building with brand new diesel engine and grinder during my visit on May 12th, an unbelievable timescale for any such project in Mozambique. In fact the builder was still finishing the concrete floor as we dedicated it and we had to come back after a late lunch to witness the first sack of maize being ground. But to her enormous credit and obvious satisfaction she had it up and running. Such

efficiency and competence generates a huge amount of trust and respect for the church.

So, although the Anglican Church is a relative newcomer to this part of Mozambique, it is held in very high regard, second only to the Roman Catholics. In fact, Fr Paulo says that when national radio want an Easter or Christmas broadcast, he's the second on the list after the RC Bishop of Chimoio (who he counts as a close friend). And the Lebombo Diocesan Synod has proposed that Fr Paulo's Archdeaconry (of Pungue) become a separate diocese. All of which testifies to the remarkable work and witness of all the people I met during my action-packed week.

I came away hugely buoyed by the energy, optimism and generosity I encountered in each of the nine churches, a mood that seems to be reflected in the country as a whole as it pulls itself off the bottom of the world's prosperity rankings. Above all, I felt immensely privileged and hugely excited to be witnessing the very beginnings of a new network of churches in a part of the world previously untouched by the Anglican Communion with its unique and generous brand of Christianity. More than once I had a sense of what it must have been like in the early church as the Holy Spirit worked through very ordinary people in spreading the church in a wonderfully haphazard but authentic fashion. Christ is indeed playing in ten thousand places and is particularly lovely in the limbs and eyes of our brothers and sisters in this wonderful part of the world.

Joe Moffatt
1/6/09



The altar party at St Bernard Mizeki,
Chimoio



Dancing and singing at Penha Longa