

VISIT TO THLABANE

JUNE 2011

(By Revd. Stephen Coles, Vicar of St Thomas, Finsbury Park)

Four of us from St Thomas Finsbury Park flew via Lisbon to Maputo overnight arriving on Saturday 18th June. We were met at the airport as dawn was breaking by about eight smiling faces, several of whom we recognised from photos. We've had a link with the parish of Ss Peter and Paul Thlabane since 1998, but this was the first time we'd met.

The parish is convenient for the airport, just 10 minutes by car, in a very poor part of the capital without made up roads. We were glad it wasn't the rainy season. We were all able to stay together in the parish house which is within the church compound. There are two adjacent houses. Our hosts, the parish priest Elias Muholove with his wife Celeste, had retreated into the older house with members of their extended family. In our house Christine and Sandra shared one room, Wesley, a Brazilian member of our congregation who speaks Portuguese, and I shared another, and the third was being used by Elias' youngest son Bartholomeu (Bato), who had come back to stay as he speaks very good English.

This arrangement made it much easier for us to get to know each other during the 12 days of our visit. Preparations had been going on since we'd fixed the date 18 months earlier to coincide with their Patronal Festival. The outside bathroom/lavatory and kitchen had been extensively renovated. A team of women from the congregation took it in turns to help Celeste prepare the food for us. This was always freshly cooked, delicious and varied. We were all overwhelmed by the hospitality. I shall long remember the soft-shelled crab in a green cassava sauce. Nothing seemed to be too much trouble, even getting up at 4 a.m. to make sure there was hot water for a bucket bath and a breakfast if we were making an early start.

We also benefitted from the time of year. We'd gone with lots of anti-mosquito equipment, but required none of it, apart from our precautionary anti-malaria tablets. Being south of the tropic, Maputo has a winter, which is reminiscent of a London summer, and, encouraged by the absence of any standing water nearby, the mosquitoes were nowhere to be seen or heard. None of us had any stomach problems either. Our hosts ensured there was always plenty of bottled water.

On our first afternoon there was a youth concert in the church, in which groups from different congregations participated. There was a lot of talent on display as well as good humour. Even though we hadn't really slept for 36 hours we were too engaged to feel tired. Once everyone was in a good mood they held a quiz with a difference. The young people were encouraging each other to be well-

informed about sexual health as HIV has had such a devastating impact on so many families. Not only was this a very imaginative way of approaching the subject, with the young people eager to show they knew, for example, how HIV is spread, but in the process we found out that they do outreach work amongst the young people of Maputo.

We were taken to various projects which helped us to understand the extent to which both parishes and the diocese are involved in improving their neighbours' quality of life.

In the centre of the city we visited the project for street boys at St Stephen and St Laurence, a church with a long connection with the English-speaking congregation in the city, which provides accommodation, education and some training for work. At the seminary we met those involved in the anti-malaria programme where the diocese and the government are working together. We also visited Juliao and Josephine Mutemba in their parish, where there is some frustration as the nursery is shut temporarily for 'health and safety' reasons (sound familiar?)

There is also work being done in Thlabane. Within the compound is a nursery for 80 local children being run by Elias' daughter Ermelina and 4 helpers. They manage with so little in a very crowded space and it was a joy to see and hear the children each day. We heard lots of other children too as there was a state primary school just over the wall, where over 1,000 children are educated in 3 shifts between 6.30 a.m. and 6.30 p.m. We met the Head Teacher, who explained how many of the children are not only looked after by grandparents (often a consequence of HIV), but come from poor homes where there are no blankets to keep them warm in winter and not even plastic sandals to wear outside the home. The classrooms were plain, with few books, teaching being done by 'chalk and talk'. The children were lively and asked lots of questions. I've got the Head Teacher of St John's Highbury Vale, our local church primary school interested in developing a link, perhaps initially between two classes the same age.

We also had the chance to get to know some of the congregation by going to services in the 3 different buildings. The parish has 7 congregations but only 3 have roofs. On the first Sunday we went to The Epiphany Laulane, a drive of about 15 minutes towards the coast. The church is unfinished so everything has to be brought each time there is a service (table for the altar, vestments, chairs, rugs for the sandy floor, books etc.) and then taken away at the end for safe keeping. The church was full to overflowing and there was a baptism in the 'font', a plastic bowl on a metal tripod. We quickly got used to joining in as well as we could both in Portuguese and Ronga, the local language. We pronounced phonetically and hoped for the best, trusting that what we were saying or singing was appropriate. I, and to a lesser extent, Sandra, Christine and Wesley, who was often busy translating whenever I opened my mouth, became

accustomed to speaking spontaneously on every occasion. Yet, as our Bishop Richard told me beforehand, the advantage of having to be translated is that it gives you time to think what you are going to say next!

At the end of the service in Laulane about 12 people sat down to lunch in the church at the 'altar' now transformed back into a dining table.

Early on another morning we went to meet the Mothers Union at their service in Ss Philip and James Mavalane. We were very aware of the strength of the Mothers Union, instantly recognisable in their black and white 'uniforms', and to a slightly lesser extent of their male equivalent, The Guild of St Bernard Mizeki, in their dark suits with a maroon and gold sash, whose constitution, Bishop Dinis informed me, is based on that of the MU. At the end of this meeting we were presented with gifts which it was clear is customary when there are guests – I had 4 capulanas in my suitcase on the way home, replacing the double mosquito net I had happily left behind.

The only 'speech' I prepared was the sermon I was asked to give at the Patronal Festival on our second Sunday in Ss Peter and Paul itself. At this I concelebrated with the bishop and Elias, who is also Archdeacon of Maputo, taking my turn during part of the eucharistic prayer in Portuguese. The service took 5 hours but no one seemed to notice, not even us. There was so much variety: baptisms, confirmations, receptions from the Roman Catholic Church (it doesn't only happen here) and admissions to the Mothers Union. Then of course the offertory itself where people make their gifts in procession while singing for as long as it takes, and at the end a variety of thanksgivings and presentations. It was the first time I've ever had a sermon simultaneously translated. Elias decided that we didn't need Portuguese too as most could manage either English or Ronga, so Wesley was spared and Bato too as Bento, the Diocesan Secretary, had better 'religious' English! However, even he needed some help from Bishop Dinis from over our shoulders.

Our presentation was of a banner made out of material from the River of Prayer by some of our congregation. This symbolically 'cemented' our link which had become much more than financial gifts and exchanges of e-mails and photos. We were able to see all that had been possible because of our link over the past 13 years and could better appreciate the difference it was making to people who were truly becoming our brothers and sisters. The perimeter wall, for example, had made the compound safer and had ensured that the services were less inclined to interruption from passers-by, without making the church like a fortress, as the well that had been dug recently from funding provided by an NGO was used by neighbours too.

We met Bishop Dinis 4 times during our stay. He invited us to lunch one day which we shared with other members of his family including a very lively young grandson. On that occasion he told us about his insensitive treatment at the

British High Commission during the application for his most recent visa. He had sent his car for us, but sent us off after lunch to experience the way Elias usually has to travel as he doesn't have a car at present – even when making archdiaconal visits. So we took a minibus to the nearest point to Thlabane that does not involve a change and then walked the rest. Very cosy!

We also met the bishop at the seminary early one day, as he says Morning Prayer with the students when he can each week, and at the Patronal Festival itself. However, the real treat was being invited to join the diocese for the special synod they were having at Maciene, about 300 kilometres to the north. We set off early the previous day in a car lent by the bishop for much of our stay. It became clear very early on that, even though we had originally planned for more members of St Thomas' to join us, 4 was an ideal number as it made both accommodation and travelling much easier. It would have been much more expensive had we needed to hire cars, or it would have severely limited what we were able to do. We drove steadily north on the only main road in the country, taking nearly 4 hours to reach Xai-Xai ('Shy-Shy') in the Province of Gaza. The countryside grew gradually more attractive and green, the population much sparser except around the highway itself. Not unlike London, Maputo seems to contain a disproportionate percentage of the population, though in this case caused by the displacement of people during the long civil war. The scene became predominantly agricultural, but with no large farms, apparently just smallholdings worked with hand tools. We continued until we were just into the Province of Inhambane. There we went first to Bishop Dinis' village of Chihunzuine. We visited Bertha Sengulane's grave, beside which we picked some delicious ripe tangerines, before looking at the ALMA funded solar panels that power the pump which supplies water for over 1,000 local people for a small charge, as well as helping them charge their mobile phones. We met the children at the nursery school and admired the vegetable garden, before being surprised by a generous lunch.

We then followed Armando, the local priest, on his motor bike along tracks to Elias' village of Magumeto nearby. We met the 3 volunteer women who run the local nursery for 160 children in one, not very large room, and the elderly evangelist, who had not only recently lost his house in a fire, but his son from illness. 'He had been working in South Africa.' We began to recognise this euphemism. There is no electricity in the village, but the local team from ALMA was soon to visit to see if something could be done about improving the water supply – in his compound Elias had erected a rickety structure feeding a small tank to catch rain water. Celeste had left us earlier and now produced a delicious meal which we ate al fresco surrounded by trees and with a distant view of the sea as dusk fell. Each thatched hut seemed to have a different purpose so that a home was made up of a collection of buildings.

The issue of clergy retirement is a considerable one as there is nothing like the provision we enjoy. Elias has worked for 40 years and still has the most amazing

energy both as parish priest and archdeacon, quite indefatigable. When he is finally able to retire to his village, he wants the water supply to be reliable.

As dusk fell we set off for Maciene, initially following the route along the track and then the main road that Elias had walked 3 hours each way to school every day. We saw his successors, both girls and boys, on their way home in their uniforms. We reached the charming rural cathedral close of Maciene after dark. Elias, Wesley and I stayed in the guest house, while Christine and Sandra had a room in the bishop's house. We joined him for supper and for breakfast the following morning. Clergy and laity had been arriving throughout the previous day from all over the diocese, some having very long journeys from the provinces of Manica and Tete. The synod had been called as Bishop Dinis now needs episcopal help. In consultation with the Province of Southern Africa the proposal is that initially two area bishops should be consecrated.

On the way back Elias had the marvellous idea of stopping by the beach at Xai-Xai for lunch. We were outside the tourist season, but one place was open. The fresh fish cooked to order and washed down with local beer was excellent. We had the opportunity to be 'tourists' on a few other occasions. When we discussed the original programme I'd had to ask for it to be edited as we didn't want to do too much travelling or for it to be too crowded. We spent part of two days being shown around Maputo by Bato, who sometimes works as a guide. He also took us a short ferry ride across the bay to a hotel with a wonderful view of the city where we could swim in the sea and have a good lunch.

The day after that we suggested going about 90 kilometres to the Reservado Especial do Maputo. We hadn't bargained on roads that felt as if we were driving across corrugation. However, it was well worth it. Near Salamanga we went to the local simple reed and thatch church and met some of the people with their deacon, Chrisaldo. In the village itself we were treated to gazelle. This was almost certainly illegal, but very tasty indeed. We then entered the park and drove right the way through to an unspoiled ocean coastline, passing a herd of hippos in a lake, a few scampering monkeys and furtive deer, but no elephants. The park had been established as the population of elephants had declined through poaching and civil war. They are still endangered. Then on the way back the driver spotted an elephant crossing the track and accelerated so that we would have the privilege. As we rounded the corner a big black bull elephant was facing us about 25 metres away, pawing the ground in anger. We stopped and went quiet, though I had to stop our driver getting out. I was in the line of the perfectly pointed white tusks in the front seat. The elephant stared and very slowly relaxed while approaching us warily from another angle to inspect us, before ambling off into the bush. A few minutes later we got stuck in sand when the driver braked to show us a rabbit! Fortunately there was a local vehicle close behind us, as there was no mobile reception there. The occupants explained that a male elephant like that is a killer as there are poachers around. They were equipped with a shovel, a torch and a rope, all of which proved necessary to

extricate us. It was now dusk and we drove carefully to the main gate, before returning to Maputo, passing the large cement works being constructed by the Chinese, in time for one of the last ferries across the bay.

On our last afternoon we met the parish council, who wanted formally to thank us for all the help St Thomas had given them, as well as giving us a financial statement of how the money had been spent. In fact they have been scrupulous about doing this once I had explained in e-mails the importance of being properly accountable. On this occasion I reinforced the information that ALMA has procedures for transferring money to ensure that everything is as transparent as possible. We had taken a present with us, which was immediately put to use so that we could see the fruits. They wanted to enlarge the church by knocking through the back wall to include the whole building, thus displacing the sacristy and office. The materials for this were bought and the work begun, Bishop Dinis laying the foundation stone after the Patronal Festival service. No faculty required! At the end of our stay we were able to give them an unexpected extra as Elias had insisted that they pay for the petrol needed for the journey to Maciene and beyond. I'd changed dollars into metacals already so suggested they spend what remained on getting directly connected to the internet – it is not a parish with internet cafés – and a printer. We've heard that this has now been done.

Our departure was sad as we had such an enjoyable visit and felt we were leaving friends. One thing this visit has brought home more sharply to me is what it means to be in communion with others around the world. There is an immediate welcome based on trust that we share something vital, rooted in the love of God. We reached the airport in 10 minutes and were sent on our way with prayer in the departure lounge, much kissing and broad smiles – a first for me was to be seen off by a delegation from the Mothers Union. We spent a night in Lisbon on the way home, at the expense of the airline as there was no scheduled connection until the following day. We can recommend this route. Not only was it the cheapest fare on offer and the only direct flight from Europe, but there is the advantage of breaking the journey on the way home, with the opportunity for relaxation, and a less abrupt homecoming.