

Irundu – First Impressions

I had the great privilege of being able to visit our friendship parish in Irundu this year. It was my first visit to Uganda and the first time I had been to Africa.

My first surprise when driving from Entebbe to Irundu was how green everything was. Somehow my idea of Africa was of a dry continent. We probably saw the countryside at its greenest as it was towards the end of the rainy season. The soil is a rich red colour. Everywhere there were trees, palms, shrubs and crops growing in abundance. It took us a while to recognise the different food crops grown – savoury bananas in wetter areas (eaten as a vegetable), cassava, maize, beans, ‘Irish’ potatoes, sweet potatoes and a great variety of fruits including jack fruits, mangoes, citrus, avocados and pineapples. I really liked the taste of the jack fruit. It is not a pretty fruit – large and rough skinned - but its flesh has a zingy taste, a bit like an Opal Fruit sweet! In the middle of a field you sometimes see a large mound of earth left undisturbed. I think this must be termite mounds. We passed some areas planted with rice which also surprised me.

Irundu is about an hour’s drive from the nearest tarmac road, deep in the countryside. There are two ‘dirt’ roads going through the village which meet at a crossroads in the centre. The village centre has a handful of small shops, a bar, a police station, the local politician’s office and not much more. The more substantial buildings seem to date back to the 1950’s and 60’s. There were a number of young men at the cross roads with bicycles and scooters waiting to be hired as taxis.

As you walk away from the centre towards the church and the Worth Friendship House (where we stayed) you pass the government health centre, a new primary school which is being built by the Sisters of Grace and Compassion, a small evangelical church and several homes built in the traditional style – round huts with thatched roofs (thatched with palm leaves). More prosperous residents might have separate cooking, sleeping and sitting huts. The huts are in an area of beaten earth with chickens running around. Many activities, such as processing the cassava, are carried out outside. There are lots and lots of young children.

The very popular primary school opposite the church has over 1,000 pupils and less than a dozen teachers. Large class sizes are the norm. Children walk long distances to school on their own from an early age. In the morning and evening there are long gaggles of children walking to or from school. One thing you really notice in Irundu is the number of children that there are and how relatively few older people there are. Uganda has a very young population – the median age is 15 and life expectancy is 50.

There is very little electricity in Irundu. What there is comes from solar panels. All water has to be drawn up from bore holes and carried to the house in plastic jerry cans. Collecting water seems to be done by women and children. There were very few cars in Irundu. Ordinary people walk, or if they are lucky, cycle. There is a daily bus service (using a mini bus) to Jinja which leaves the village very early in the morning. Most people in the village are farmers, growing enough food for their family and perhaps having some over to sell. If they have done well they might have some cattle. These would be prized possessions and we didn’t see that many of them.