

St Peter's Life-Line

Hope through Education



Head teacher Jane taking a school assembly

**Our first visit to St Peter's – 8th to 14th February 2010
INSPIRING,
HUMBLING, and
at times....
HEARTBREAKING**

Supporting St Peter's Primary School, Kajuki, Kenya

We had seen some pictures, texted and emailed Fr Joe on many occasions, and sometimes, through rather broken Skype sessions, seen grainy images of the school and heard the squeaks and squeals of excited children rocketing round Fr Joe as he tried to make sensible conversation! So we had some idea of what St Peter's was all

about when we set off from a cold, wintry UK on 7th February, laden with 2 suitcases each and a total of 96 kg of clothes and goodies for the children. The reality, discovered every day on our six day visit, revealed a lot, lot more, which was inspiring, humbling, and at times heartbreaking....

Where is Kajuki?

Kajuki is a parish in the Diocese of Meru in the Eastern Province of Kenya. It is in the shadow of Mt Kenya and is about 3½ hours (of a rather exciting!) drive north from Nairobi. The parish has an estimated population of 40,000, covering an area of 200 sq km, centred round the village of Kajuki. It is an infertile, baking hot, harsh, semi arid region, with a growing season of only two months, in which the average annual rainfall is a meagre 400mm.

When the rains fail (as they did three years' previous) famine stalks the land and food prices soar. It is

a hard, unforgiving place to survive, let alone live. As a result, it is a very poor parish, one of the poorest in the region.

The village of Kajuki is about 25 kms east of the nearest sizeable town, Chuka, which is halfway between the north/south Embu/Meru B6 tarmac road. The road from Chuka to Kajuki is a dirt track, sometimes impassable during the rains. A new tarmac road is being built to Meru, and will pass quite close by Kajuki, thereby opening up more access to the area, although the road's primary purpose is to facilitate tourism to the Game Parks further North and East.



Map of Kenya. Kajuki is shown by green marker 'A'

"I do not want my community to be beggars.... we seek to be self-reliant." Fr Joe



Father Joe's vision

During his pastoral rounds of his parish Fr Joe came across Steven, a young lad who had been badly burned on the arms, stomach and chest in a domestic accident. Steven's burns had healed so badly that the taut skin prevented him putting his hand to his mouth to feed himself. Fr Joe took him to hospital and paid, from his own resources, for surgery to correct his condition. From this experience Fr Joe vowed to help the poor, the disadvantaged and the orphans of the parish by feeding and educating them. Steven is now a happy, mobile boarder at the school.

The Parish

The parish has thirty churches – and one parish priest – Fr Joe Justus. His principal church is St Peter's at Kajuki, where he is based. Trained catechists run the other churches on a daily basis. It takes Fr Joe 8 months to get to every church in his parish. St Peter's parish is a vibrant, well organised and well motivated church community.



Kajuki market with the main road running through it

St Peter's Primary School

Fr Joe started St Peter's Primary School in 2006 with 60 pupils. It is a 'private school', meaning that it has no formal Government or Church support – it has to find its own means. Fr Joe's aim is to bring in children from all around the parish, from whatever faith or none, whose parents cannot even afford the meagre costs (books, uniform, food) of sending them to local government primary schools. Some income is provided by a proportion of parents who can afford, and are willing to pay the full fees of 7,000 KSh (about £60) per term. The school is about 220 strong at present, with 100 or so boarders, of whom some 60 are orphans – mainly through HIV/AIDS deaths of their parents. Last year (2009), it was rated by the Government assessment figures as the best all-round academic performing school, with 15 of its pupils being in the top twenty from the 4,000 odd children and 17 schools in the parish.

The school's classes are a kindergarten, pre-primary, and classes 1 – 5, advancing each year as the school reaches to classes 6,7 and 8, eventually completing the full Primary school range.

There are a total of fourteen staff and teachers. The teachers earn an average of 5,000 KSh (about £43) per month. The terms are 3 months long with a one month holiday

In between - the academic year running from Jan to Dec. Fr Joe does not have the funding to pay the teachers during holiday time – and this they willingly accept. They work long hours, to a high standard, with scanty resources, some undertaking extra duties – such as acting as house-parents to the boarders overnight – with no extra remuneration.



Breakfast time for the boarders



Some of the Kindergarden pupils waiting patiently for their clothing gifts

The school day

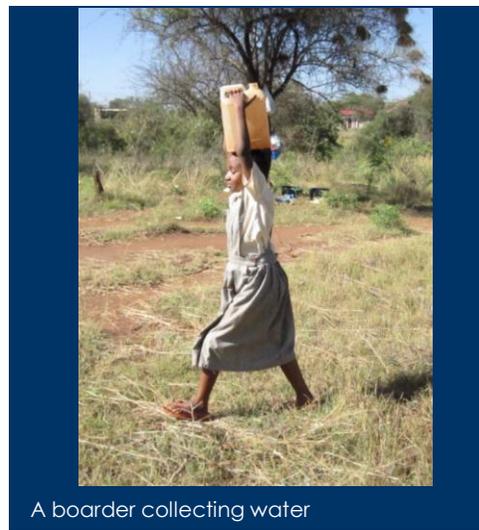
The boarders start their day with 0630 Mass and breakfast at seven, and do two hours prep each evening – lights out at nine. They live in very crowded dormitories, two tier bunks, two to each bunk, sometimes three! The boarders are totally self sufficient, doing their own clothes washing every day, and helping with the communal chores. The main school day starts at eight in the morning with assembly, and goes to four in the afternoon, ending with a daily school 'clean up'.

Food and water

Ironically, the children at this school are probably the best fed in the land, thanks to the careful feeding programme – and this shows in their generally healthy demeanour, their energy, and their sound academic results. The boarders start with breakfast at 7 am with a large mug of maize and sorghum (tastes like glue – we tried some – but obviously very nutritious!). There is an 11 am meal break for the whole school: tea and porridge, bread on Wednesdays and Saturdays – which is a luxury and a hugely anticipated treat. Lunch is at 1pm is usually rice based – meat and fruit on Thursdays – again a treat, and the boarders have supper at 6pm.

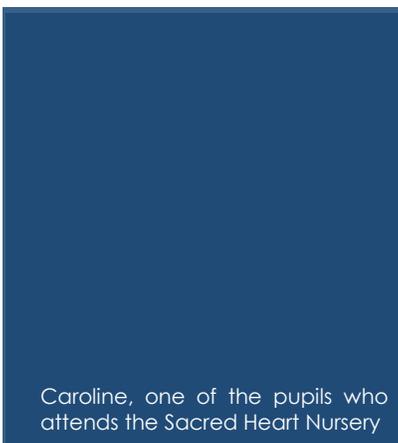
Piped water arrived at the school when we were there – a huge improvement from the rather ad hoc

There is a 'taxi' service (about 14 children packed into the back of an estate car which charges extortionate rates) to bring children in from afar every working day. The criteria for a lift in the taxi is to live more than 5 kms away – anyone under that distance has to walk. Some of the youngsters – aged four upwards – walk two hours each way to school – by themselves.



A boarder collecting water

pumping arrangement they had with the neighbouring secondary school, or when that failed, the children having to go down the steep hill to the river half a kilometre away and lug barrels of water back up. Piped water sounds good – but it is not clean – it comes straight from the river and has to be boiled before being fit to drink – all done, as is all the cooking, over open fires. Fr Joe has two pigs, thirty three goats and three cows which serve as the school meat supply.



Caroline, one of the pupils who attends the Sacred Heart Nursery



"If you deprive yourself for the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, your light will rise in the darkness, and your darkest hour will be like noon." Isaiah 58:10

The wider community of St Peter's

Although Fr Joe's vision is centred on St Peter's Primary School, he has been unable to resist other elements of developmental self-help growth at both ends of his community! Along came Patrick – an enthusiastic and skilled upholsterer with the burning desire to start a **Technical School** as part of the community. This he has done – starting with a grant from Fr Joe of 500 KSh (about £4:35!), and has built up and built, with his students, a workshop, dormitory for the girls, and two small offices. The youngsters who attend (two courses of twenty, on a two year course), are again taken from poor families and who have no prospect of going to secondary school.

Here they are taught dress making and tailoring skills for the girls and carpentry and construction for the boys – all working to national syllabus and qualifications. Again, there is no formal funding from the Church or State – it all falls to St Peter's to support and fund.

Some 5 kilometres away from Kajuki Fr Joe has founded a **nursery school** in a desperately poor area of some twenty youngsters – the Sacred Heart, based in a former presbytery. One of the main aims of the nursery is the feeding programme where the children receive one hot meal.



A lesson at the Technical College



Arabilla and her siblings outside their home

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The heart breaking bit

We had the privilege of visiting some of the families at their homes during our stay. Amongst them were two families of young children being looked after by quite elderly grandmothers – their parents having sadly died of HIV/AIDS. Another family was being looked after by the eldest child (Arabilla pictured above) – 17 – and her three younger siblings – existing on the barest of resources in grindingly poor conditions.

Another young mother, living miles from the road and river, had crippled feet – she could walk, but not carry weight – her six year old son had the daily task of carrying the family's water from the river some two kilometres away. One of these families' mainstays is one or two of their children being fed and educated at St Peter's.

HOPE

Our visit was very memorable. We were so impressed with what can be done with so little resource but with such goodwill and love. We were made so welcome, and underlying it all was laughter and joy. We are under no illusion though, of the challenges that this community face, and their desire to better their lot.