Chronicles of an Island Parish no. 50 – FIFTY folks! Is it time to approach a publisher?

Dear Readers – peripheral, casual or intense, today is Wednesday 23rd January, let me vainly attempt to re-capture the past weeks’ impressions. encounters and experiences. But first what I wrote before travelling to Ascension Island:

I think we could justifiable start with reference to the original Papal Indict of Pius VII of 7th June 1818 erecting the Vicariate of the Cape of Good Hope and adjacent territories (incl. islands). This would be most of southern Africa including Australia, New Zealand and so on. Don’t laugh…remember Australia at the time was a penal colony and territory for a British solution to a/social post-Waterloo problems.

Our three island groups of St Helena, Tristan and at a push Ascension would also be included.

So the news that:

pillar of the Catholic Church on the Island of Tristan da Cunha, Mrs Anne Violet Green has been awarded the MBE (Member of the Order of British Empire) falls historically and of interest within the Chronicle’s ambit this time.

Quoting: Mrs Green retired as a Head Teacher after spending 43 years in the teaching profession…she stated in 1975…She was the first female Chief Islander and has served as a member of the Island’s Council for many years. Mrs Green has also been Acting Administrator of Tristan on a number of occasions. Her voluntary work extended to the tourist sector…she helped to raise funds (of a pop. 250…did Cape Town Archdiocese help?) to build the first Catholic Church and has been instrumental in a number of charitable endeavors. She is highly respected and actively helps people in the community, especially the elderly and the less fortunate.

Lisa Honan
Governor of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha

Sunday evening 6th: this evening was magical (nothing to do with the Magi) – the younger generation would say ‘Wicked’, awesome is better. I have just returned from being invited to come aboard a very small harbour ferryboat to go out a welcome home our Island yacht in the Cape to St Helena Yacht race. Other yachts have been arriving since Thursday but as winners are decided on a multitude of handicap calculations as yet no winners can be announced. The sea was calm, temperature around 25 C and despite the
dark night dolphins saw it as an opportunity to show themselves in the
search-lights while the sky was a canopy of star clusters. ‘Carpe Diem’ has
arrived home safely in port having triumphed over three crew members
‘walking off ship’ (deserting) in Cape Town at the end of the outward voyage.

After securing at a buoy in the bay we brought the family plus a South African
crewman, Rob Winter, to the Wharf step; it was very gratifying to see a large
crowd even at 10 Sunday night to welcome them home. This was no ‘rent-a-
crowd’ but genuine well-wishers who clapped and cheered as the family step
ashore onto the Wharf steps. The Governor waived even immigration and
custom controls until the next day.

Since writing this previous paragraph all the yachts have arrived, winners
announced and trophies handed over, and many returned to Cape Town,
whether sailing back or being yachts piggybacked aboard our container
vessel, MV Helena. On a personal note several of you took a gratifying
decision to entrust or bring parcels on board from Cape Town of which I was
the beneficiary. THANK YOU for your efforts and gifts (even when carried in
the bilges!)

Certainly one of the memorable experiences of the young Sea Scouts from
aboard ‘Rotary Scout’ was swimming with the whale sharks just beyond the
harbour.

Of course yachtsies are always most welcome visitors to our Island and over
the years friendships have flourished and been cemented.

Many of you have previously read that one of my young cats was killed –
Skelmpie, the very precocious one. To update: the local Island vet and others
at the surgery felt I needed to be ‘comforted’ and Wit-Poodjie has a friend!
Following my return from Ascension (more about this in a moment) I was
asked to collect the ‘replacement’! Barely a weaned kitten (less than the size
of my hand) with similar markings. I decided to call him ‘Tickey’ a former
South Africa informal name for Thruppeny Bit – 3 pence. Quite obviously I
have become his adopted mother and ‘talks’ repeatedly to me even the litter-
box calls….. I now have hardly a moment’s peace and my desk and the PC
screen is seen as a feline Disneyland theme park. Fortunately after a week
with a 24-hour ‘disappearing act’ – guess to test my resolve of parenting, the
other cat has taken to the younger and they chase each other alternatively,
prepared to rub noses and share eating bowls. But enough about cats just to
report right now Tickey is fast asleep next to the PC basking in the warmth of
the desk-lamp. He must be ‘cross-bred as he has the ability to sit upright like
a meerkat ! The ribbons of my Breviary are a constant source of

Before I attempt to briefly describe my 4-day visit to Ascension; an interesting
visitor this past week was a Dr John Clark retired pathologist of Aberdeen,
Scotland (there’s an Aberdeen in South Africa too). He came here on official
business. However in previous assignments he was part of a team in Kosovo establishing cause of death and identity of the victims of that horrific conflict and more recently establishing the identity of Argentinean soldiers who had been killed in the 1982 Falklands – las Malvinas, conflict and been buried there but without any form of identification. (These soldiers did not have ‘Dog tags’). Of the 120 odd nearly 100 have been identified, names attached to grave headstones and Argentinean families who came to the dedication earlier last year a Closure to a military tragedy and loss of loved-ones.

While on Scotland, on Ascension met up with the music teacher at the one and only primary-secondary school who is on 2 year contract and comes from Harris on the Outer Hebrides. How’s that for commitment; Ruth has three young adult children all pursuing different careers in the UK and all very musically versatile. Of the 100 children at the school she has taught quite a number to play musical instruments and established a youth choir. The hope is to develop the school into a High school as right now children are sent away to either St Helena or the UK for further schooling.

Finally ASCENSION:

Just less than a 2-hour flight about 5º south of the equator and an air-ticket reduced by a holiday discount of 50% at £450.

If St Helena is wonderful then Ascension is 'magical':

Ascension Island is one volcano and only 1% above sea level with a population of less than 1000.

Part of the Island is like South Africa’s Karroo while the single high mountain (the cone) a manmade tropical forest courtesy of Kew Gardens in the 19th century. The sheep and donkeys are wild and roam all over the place.

It is a huge complex for the BBC and NASA satellite relay stations for the South Atlantic and southern hemisphere and has 2 military bases: British and USA. One is left puzzling what in addition all this electronics are about; at a guess a huge ‘Listen Centre’ – perhaps even for Extra Terrestrials.

Multiple interchangeable currencies: £, $ and SH £ which are used all over; you pay with sterling get back dollars, etc.

It reminds me of a futuristic Mars colony. The Greens of the golf course, football soccer pitch are sand and gravel and for obvious reason rugby is a no-no.

I was able to swim in the sea several times at Comfortless Cove with a sea temperature of over 25º C among tropical fish – sharks or not. Just above the
Cove is the small sad Bonnita cemetery amidst the shore-line rocks of perhaps 10 graves of marines put ashore with yellow fever to much fend for themselves and either recover or die; among them an American seaman from the US Constellation of 1860 odd. Average day temp is 30º C at night cooler.

The Catholic Church was built in 1944 by American Servicemen on the US military base during WW II - ergo belongs to the military and is classified as a Historic building by the military. It is open-sided and dedicated to Our Lady of the Ascension. I was unable to say Mass there as I had no chalice, wine etc. At my visit prayed the Rosary and left a small Pilgrim Mother in front of the altar – which no one will ever steal.

When I arrived on Saturday I was met by several Anglicans and immediately given the keys of an almost new Ford Fiesta to drive about the Island _ first time ever. No Catholic identified themselves while I was on the Island though I heard there are several Filipinos working at the US base as firemen, but they never made contact.

On Sunday I celebrated our Catholic Mass for the Anglicans for which they were deeply grateful….the last time for them was September 2018. As there is a 3 month moratorium before I may visit again, I shall plan better - this time it was just a recce (reconnaissance).

In conclusion but by no means unimportant: my heartfelt appreciation for very many of you who sent either Emails or hardcopy Christmas cards and good wishes. It would seem the final batch, posted early December, arrived on the Island by some means while I was away on Ascension. Your contacts with me remains a golden thread of friendship.

With my blessings as Parish Priest of both St Helena & Ascension, 

Father David

PS Several days before I flew to Ascension the work of re-roofing the church building and auxiliary jobs, including the contractors’ clean-up was completed. What needs to follow is a mega Spring Clean, though unsure who will assist here. The final account was £10700 of which over half was for labour while the special imported epoxyed corrugated iron sheets from South Africa was less than £4000. If any Reader wants our bank details I can oblige !!!