

## Fr Paul's Visit to Irundu, April 2016

My abiding impression of Irundu is one of immense warmth – both physical, over 30 C, but most of all, human. The welcome which Paul and Ali Ambridge and I received from all whom we met was overwhelming, and I felt that, for those who have very few material possessions, human relationships are especially important. I was impressed by their enthusiasm for life, expressed particularly in their Sunday liturgy. Although I was disappointed that it lasted only two hours, and not the four hours I'd been expecting, the strength and beauty of the singing and evident devotion of the people who were packed into the parish church demonstrated a quality of faith which we would envy.

This sense of vibrant life was felt everywhere: in the rich and fertile brown soil, which produced trees and shrubs with brilliantly coloured flowers, which were inhabited by a great variety of birds whose songs were as strong as the singing in church, and whose plumage was vibrant with every colour in the rainbow.

The whole country struck me as one which teemed with young life – everywhere, many, many children, all eager to meet us and engage with us with great curiosity.

Most important of all, of course, was the chance to meet and get to know Fr Stephen, who has been parish priest there for sixteen years, and who has built up the parish single handed from almost nothing. Apart from a network of some forty five mass stations spread over a huge area, each with a lay leader and team of catechists, he has created a secondary school, recently declared the third best school in the area, a vocational school, where pupils learn skills to prepare them for employment, and a health centre, which serves many people in areas of health which are frequently fatal if left untreated – HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB and child birth. Fr Stephen is a man who combines some very remarkable gifts, displaying a warmth and humanity which encourages everyone he meets, and also a great capacity for administration of the many works for which the parish is responsible.

I left feeling very privileged to have been able to experience all this, and grateful to all of you for making it possible for me to visit. I would recommend this to anyone who could make a visit, and encourage us all to support Fr Stephen and his parish.