

## News from Sarah Casson November 2016

*Reasons to rejoice...* Dear friends, I'm delighted that I've recently been granted writing up status in my studies, which means radically reduced fees, and growing light at the end of the thesis tunnel! I'm hoping that with God's help to think creatively and concentrate, a dose of steely determination to give the cold shoulder to distractions, and the patient guidance of my supervisor, I may be ready to submit my thesis around Easter. Revelling in the glory of the autumn reds and golds, I realise just how much better I feel than I did at this time last year. In the midst of the troubling news that assails us every day from around the world, I want to thank God for his healing and for many good gifts and signs of new life and hope.



Anna Dorothy

Our family has been overjoyed by the birth of Anna Dorothy to my brother Francis and his wife Catherine at the end of September. That means that I'm now a real aunt and can put my elbows on the table at the age of 47. My brother John, a covert linguist, pointed out that Anna means grace or gift, and Dorothy gift of God, in Hebrew and Greek respectively. We're truly experiencing her as a precious gift. I'm hoping to make the most of this window of opportunity I have to get to know Anna before I become a long distance aunty.



with Anna and Francis

*When in Rome, do as the Romans do?* For years I've dreamed of going to Rome. I was gutted last September when I had to pull out of a trip with friends for health reasons. So I was thrilled this autumn to be able to fulfil the dream and travel to the Eternal City with my parents for our birthdays. We stayed in a very accommodating convent in Trastevere, on the west bank of the Tiber. We quickly established a daily routine of popping round the corner for an authentic cappuccino at the local breakfast bar, where we tried to decipher from the Italian newspapers the latest lurches of the US election rollercoaster and Brexit developments. We noticed, though, that such leisurely newspaper browsing is only for tourists. Romans down their cappuccino in one, standing at the bar, before rushing off to work. Dad, never being one for waiting, was rather taken by this approach, and followed suit by snatching a swift espresso one morning during a five minute wait for the bus into the city.

Our stay was full of autumnal contrasts. One day we soaked up Mediterranean sunshine; the next we got caught in dramatic downpours and sought in vain for shelter among the



overlooking the Roman forum

imposing temple columns and towering triumphal arches of the Roman forum. I resorted to purchasing a rain poncho with a classy Colosseum design on the back, and wearing a plastic bag on my head. I'm not sure this is what the Romans would do, but the bag is a tried and tested Congolese method of staying dry.



rainbow over the Palatine Hill

We were chuffed to discover that we'd arrived in Rome the very same day as the Archbishop of Canterbury and a whole host of other Anglican dignitaries! They had come to attend a joint symposium and service with the Pope and members of the Roman Catholic Church, in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of closer co-operation between the two churches. We made a mini pilgrimage to the basilica of San Gregorio in the hope of attending the service. We weren't allowed in without official invitations, but we joined the crowd of well wishers waiting outside and were rewarded by a smile and a warm wave from the Pope. On the Sunday we especially enjoyed attending a mass at Santa Maria di Trastevere, probably the oldest church in Rome, which may have been a centre for Christian worship when Christianity was still a persecuted minority faith. I loved the friendly, open atmosphere and the way people were quick to welcome us during the Peace, giving us a sense of participating in God's worldwide family.



Mum and Dad at the Gianicolo



*Looking to the past...* Since I'm studying Paul's letter to the Romans, the holiday conveniently doubled up as a research trip. I visited various archaeological treasures from the first century AD, and got a faint glimpse of what life may have been like for Paul's original addressees. I was especially stunned by the complete old city of Ostia Antica, about 20 miles from Rome itself, which used to be the main port for the capital at the time of Augustus. Among its many jewels, it boasts several public baths with exquisite mosaic floors, a fast food joint with marble counters and a menu with paintings of available dishes, a shipwrights' square with mosaics depicting the exotic regions Ostia's merchants traded with, a fishmonger's with marble tanks that may have



mosaic of Neptune at the public baths

contained live fish, sophisticated public water fountains, a fire brigade's barracks, and a first-century synagogue, unique in the Western world. My visit to the St. Priscilla catacombs, an ancient underground cemetery, was unforgettable, too. Christians sometimes met here, outside the city walls, in the first centuries after Christ. They left frescoes on the ceilings and walls of the underground passages. I was especially fascinated by a painting dating from 270 AD of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, dressed as a Roman shepherd with high boots, a short tunic, no beard, and short hair.



Jesus the Good Shepherd

I came away from the towering brick walls, arches, theatres and temples of Rome with an enduring impression of imposing imperial splendour. Two thousand years after its heyday, the city's architecture still has the power to instil amazement. It's hard to imagine just how awe-inspiring the city would have been in the first century, complete and magnificently clad in marble, and how formidable for anyone who attempted to challenge Rome's claim to represent good news for the world.

*Looking to the future...* Once I finish my studies, I hope to return to DRC next year to continue working in Bible translation. There are many uncertainties in Congo at the moment. The political situation is precarious. Elections that were due this month have now been postponed till 2018. In recent months there has been election-related violence and there are fears that this postponement may lead to further instability, though it has been hailed by some as a breakthrough. Around the town of Beni, 150km from Bunia, where a number of my colleagues and friends have family members, there have been ongoing horrific attacks against the local population by a militia group, the ADL. The future of the translation programme I was involved in at Shalom University is uncertain because the scholarships previously provided by SIL for students have been cut due to a lack of funding. Meanwhile there are many language communities waiting for Bible translation work to start, and teams such as the Omi translators waiting for more input from translation consultants so that they can complete the New Testament in their languages. Please keep praying for DRC.

*Thank God...*

- ✓ For Anna's birth.
- ✓ For good gifts, signs of hope and rainbows
- ✓ For holidays, families and birthdays.
- ✓ That I've been granted writing up status.
- ✓ For translators persevering in tough conditions in DRC.

*Please pray...*

- ✓ For political stability and good governance in DRC.
- ✓ For protection for the population around Beni and an end to the ADL's attacks.
- ✓ For God's guidance for the future of the USB translation programme.
- ✓ For creativity, concentration and discipline as I write my thesis.
- ✓ For God's guidance about my future role beyond my studies.

*With love, Sarah*