

June 27

Br BERNHARD LISSON

21 August 1909 – 27 June 1978



Br Bernhard Lisson grew up in a part of East Germany which is now Poland where he qualified as a blacksmith. A powerful man with what Wolfgang Thamm calls ‘a frightening physique’, he was more used to a hammer than a pen. But he did write of himself that as a boy he wondered, ‘How long did the little boy Jesus have to wait in the shed of Bethlehem until he was

allowed out! Then the light dawned on me. He and the Holy Family needed help.’ He joined the Jesuits in 1931 and in the novitiate he ‘began to develop his talent for invention and improvisation, converting a rusty old locomotive into a potato steamer with which to process wagon loads of potatoes for cattle feed’ (Thamm).

In 1935, he said farewell to his family at home in Bowallno and there is no record he ever returned there. He was one of the four Jesuits who founded the new mission of the East German province, formalised in 1959. Bernhard worked at Triashill for 13 years before moving to Musami, where he was badly burnt when he helped fix a car that had broken down on the way to Salisbury. It took Sr Kiliana OP months to cure his dreadful burns. In 1959, he went to Marymount from which St Albert’s was founded. Br Lisson was the driving power behind the building of the new mission, 200 kms N of Harare. Fr Norbert Gille remembers the day when all the priests and brothers and mission helpers were summoned to ‘lift the trusses with nothing but a long rope and the booming voice of Br Lisson shouting, ‘Pull! Pull!’ We did. The walls vibrated; the gable wobbled but with the genius of Br Lisson we succeeded.’ Lisson trained the people he worked with so that when he was away everything continued to work well. And he was ever available for the endless requests for fixing cooking pots, bicycles, scotch carts and so forth. (The photo shows him on right planning with fellow Jesuits at St Albert’s around 1967)

In 1972, now over 60 and beginning to feel his age and the effects of a back injury he sustained at Musami when he fell into a well, he moved to a smaller place where he would be in semi-retirement: Makonde. Fr Gregor Richert was alone there and delighted to have Bernhard as a companion and one who could repair things. The local people warned them in mid-1978 that it was getting dangerous but they wanted to stay with the people. The day came when three men, strangers

in civilian clothes but carrying rifles, entered the mission. After an altercation with Richert about money they became annoyed. They moved away and turned and shot him. Lisson meanwhile was pleading with them for Richert but they shot him too and the spanner he was holding was found afterwards in a pool of his own blood.