

December 2011

The gravediggers were wreathed in dust as they furiously scraped, shoveled and filled the grave. I was standing only feet away but they were almost invisible in the swirling cloud. For a brief moment I caught sight of a red peaked cap, a yellow T shirt and a raised shovel.

The service at the graveside had been a simple thing. None of the twelve men and women gathered there minutes earlier around the rough plywood box knew or had even seen the deceased except when they collected her from the hospital freezer, put her in the box and loaded her onto the back of the old pick up truck. I had not known or seen her either.



Remembrance Day, 11.11.11, in Maalla Cemetery

We only learned her name, Shawa, from the death certificate held in the hands of young Abdullah, faithful keeper of the cemetery and gravedigger. The certificate had been issued by the UNHCR, who had phoned the previous evening to say that they had the body of a Christian Ethiopian woman for burial. I then contacted Abdullah to ask him to prepare the grave.



A new wheelchair for smiley Somali Muhammad

Somehow, the leaders of the Ethiopian congregation, who worship at Christ Church on a Thursday evening, all of whom are refugees, undertook to make a coffin and to help with the burial. And so it was that late yesterday afternoon, as the day cooled and the sun began to set that we buried Shawa. I was very proud of the twelve friends who had come across the city to pray and to help.

I have since learned that Shawa had only arrived on the shores of Yemen a few days earlier, having made the dangerous crossing over from Somalia in a little open boat. She had made it to the main refugee camp on the outskirts of Aden where she was found, slumped and semi-conscious, lying against the wall of a little clinic. From there she had been brought to the old government hospital in the centre of town where she died soon after admission. She remained lucid long enough to indicate that she was a Christian.



The newly-married Elyas and Tigest

At the graveside, I spoke of Jesus' teaching about God knowing even when a sparrow dies, and told them God knew and noticed when Shawa died. Alone in death, I thanked those gathered fervently for being her family for the minutes we were there together at her graveside. They had, I said, done a good thing. I know them all.

Today, one of the staff, a local, Yemeni male nurse and Muslim, expressed his sadness at the death of our unknown friend, and offered me a coffin used to transport a relative of his back to Yemen, who had died in Jordan. Muslims bury their loved ones in a shroud, not a box, so the coffin used to transport his uncle remained unused. I know we shall use it, and I expect to soon.

Life here is harsh and often short, but in this environment gestures of kindness and love shine very bright – and they are not rare. It is good to be here.



Shopping at night in Crater