

Fragments from the Frontier # 6



The 'Windy Season': dust, dust, and more dust!

I am sorry that the Fragments have not been forthcoming recently, but I hope to make it up in this rather larger 'Fragment'! This comes in the midst of the 'windy season', where the sand of the desert ends up in your food, in your ears and mouth, in every nook and cranny of the buildings. Housework seems useless, for as soon as you have reached the end of sweeping/dusting the verandah/room and make the mistake of looking back over your work, you wonder how it is that it looks the same as before you started. Everything is covered with a thin film of fine sand! The wind is ferocious, and although the mornings are cooler (28C), by mid-afternoon it is hot, (34C), and the wind feels like it may roast you! Standing over the banana plantation to call the men for a break, the wind almost lifted off the top of the stairs! It has tattered all the banana leaves, but hopefully will not spoil the chances of the first crop of bananas....

At the moment I am 'alone' in the mission, since Irene, our last volunteer, left a week ago. Tesema and Abdella, two young men whom we employ to work in the garden and help with the water supply have 'stepped up' since the last volunteer left.... You can imagine my surprise when I came to prepare supper and found both of them working away at making 'gazpacho'! They looked like two naughty boys who had been caught out! It is not only the evening cooking they help me out with, but with all the myriad of little tasks which are so time consuming. For example, since I discovered that most of the children have different digestive sicknesses, I try to give each woman or man, a 3 or 5 litre container of drinking water when they go home (we try to have it frozen overnight to give respite in the heat). The task of filling all the water containers for everyone, each day, and making sure they are put in the freezer has been joyfully taken on by both men!

The water situation has been very dramatic as I explained in the last 'fragment'. The problem of re- installing the pump took a lot of time, and we discovered that when the



Irene with some of the children

water receded, the devastation was quite extensive. The mechanic came at least three times, fixing one thing only to discover (after a few days) that something else needed to be repaired. Anyway, after what seemed like a marathon of driving up and down to look for the mechanic, or trying to buy parts, together with the expense of it all, we finally had the pump working again!



Hard at work with the bananas

Fr Angelo has come and gone frequently over the past few weeks, trying to not leave us without his care and concern. He has masterminded the final planting of the 400 banana trees in one sector of the land. We have had our first ‘crop’ of peanuts, most of which we shall use to replant a larger area (now that we know that they grow well!). The three different types of beans that we have planted are doing well and give hope that we shall make strides towards self-sufficiency eventually. As I wrote in one of my last fragments Fr Angelo, can often be seen pacing the land and making ‘plans.’ Plans that will solve our water issues, in the face of the real danger of being flooded again. The water tanks built to purify water have not proved ‘fit for purpose’, and so Father comes this weekend with his ‘team’ to try to repair the leaks and to put pipes in places which will make the system work better.



Abdella in the tank with the sticky mud.

I am amazed at how hard, not only Tesema, and Abdella, but also Tadios, and Ahmed, from the town, work. I found them this Tuesday, in the first tank digging out the mud and clay which had settled, almost two metres of it. This very sticky work took almost three full days of hard labour to complete. Covered in mud and exhausted at the end of each day, they were still cheerful and ready for the next job at hand!

We are now a little community of twenty-one children and babies, twelve women, five men (who work on the land), and me together with Fr Angelo when he can come. Oh! I forgot to mention my four-legged friends who occupy the field adjacent to my house: twenty-three goats, many of whom are pregnant!

I keep on saying “no more ladies!” but find myself facing such situations of human desperation, that I cannot refuse! Kalkidan, was found sleeping on a verandah, with her two children, one of whom, the baby, Suraphael, is not even walking yet; another: Ashome, is the mother of the little girl Fario, who died of pneumonia, and was suffering from severe malnutrition. Her two other children are already attending our little kindergarten.



breakfast for the toddlers

The nurse in the malnutrition clinic met me when I was delivering some hospital gowns I had found in our store (the work of cleaning the store continues!). He asked me to try to find

Ashome who had left the clinic a few weeks before and he was worried because the child had not put on enough weight. I went to the area in which I thought that Ashome lived and found her sitting looking at the terribly emaciated child, who was gasping for breath. Poor Ashome could not understand why the child had not eaten for the past three days, thinking that when the injections were stopped and the drip and nose drip removed, that the child could go home. She did not understand that the formula given to be drunk was part of the treatment. Obviously, we returned to the emergency department of the hospital where the child was received. Unfortunately, Fario died that night.

This sad event has taught me that nothing can be taken for granted, things that we think are obvious, are not so to someone who is poor, always trying to manage, always dependent on another for daily sustenance. In this situation it is difficult then to expect them to suddenly begin to consider possibilities. They do not want to be a bother, to trouble and so disappear when the need is not judged to be immediate. Once Ashome had recovered a little from the death of her child. I took her to the doctor as I was worried that she was anaemic. When she was dealt with, we went with the other two children, who, even though they have been with us for the last two months are still 'border line malnutrition.'

Tomorrow Fr Angelo will arrive to spend a week with us which means we shall have Mass every day! An opportunity to give thanks to God for all the good we can do and ask for the grace to do the good He wants us to do in this place on the frontiers of Gospel! You are in my prayer, thank you for your prayers, please continue!



Ladies off to clear land for the children to play on