

Monkey bags, funerals and intestines with rice

Dear all,

What an eventful week this has been. It is the last of our teaching weeks, which has seen an emotional response from both us and the students. It has also been very eventful outside of the college too.

Monday saw the funeral prayers for Paul Issa's mother who had died over a week before. This was a very long and a very moving affair. We were at the event for just over six hours on what was an incredibly hot day. It was moving that so many of the population of Mundri had come to pay their respects to a lovely Christian woman who had been such a positive witness to so many. The testimonies about her came from family members as well as the many official visitors who had gathered. Tim and I were asked to bring greetings and a message of encouragement to the family, which left us both with a humbling sense of privilege. This was about the only element that was in English, but we weren't left in a position of struggle as both Tim and I had our own personal episcopal translators. Both the Bishop of Mundri (Bismark) and the Bishop of Lui (Steven) were present to pay their respects to Josefina and they looked after us so well. The proceedings were lovely involving singing, testimony, preaching (1 hour and 8 mins!!!!!!) and Holy Communion. The latter contributed to the time span given the number of people who were present.

Alongside these profound and moving moments there were also moments of astounding perplexity. Tim and I had been kept awake for several nights by the sound of electronic music and singing of the most annoying variety. The tradition at local funerals is to continue the singing and prayers on into the night, and on into the early hours of the morning and on into the first hours of the following day. This was beginning to vex us more than a little. And then, on Monday, here was the culprit right before us except this time it wasn't a sound in the distance, we were at the full mercy of his drum beat backing track and maximum volume speakers. Imagine our delight at spending six whole hours with him. Bliss!

We also met an old lady carrying what can only be described as a monkey bag. It was literally the skin and head of a local red monkey. She had somehow managed to remove everything that is inside a monkey, clean it and then have it hanging around her neck as a fashion accessory. Access to the bag was via what could only be described as its rear end. Imagine my surprise as she reached into the bag to remove the distinctive remains of its tail which doubled as a clothes brush. She demonstrated this by brushing the dust very vigorously from my trousers.

This happened shortly after 'refreshments'. This must have cost a fortune as the family were providing for such a huge number of guests. Their generosity was incredible. I dutifully accepted my bowl of rice and various 'meats' and returned to my seat to enjoy the food. Some of the meat did carry a unique taste and was virtually indestructible and entirely impossible to swallow. I enquired as to its identity from my neighbour who informed me it was an animal's intestine, though he wasn't sure which animal. I'm afraid I had to give up with it as after more than several minutes of chewing I hadn't even managed to dent it! If some of this appears flippant, let me reiterate that this funeral was incredible in so many ways and deeply moving. As is often the case though, that which is profound is often accompanied by that which is humorous.

The week continued to present challenges from that point. On the Tuesday, after a full day of teaching, I was asked to speak at a 'crusade' event outside Mundri cathedral on the topic of repentance. I had an idea or two up my sleeve so accepted and thought it would be good to help out if I could. When I asked how long they wanted me to speak for they told me, with no hint of humour or error, around two hours should be enough. We negotiated a bit, and I

encouraged the gathered choir into a song or two at certain junctures and proceeded. I even managed to convince the students to come and do their prodigal son drama to help me out. This too was an incredible event that led to a call to repentance, a time of prayer ministry including some very challenging deliverance ministry. Thank the Lord for his equipping and grace at work that night.

We also visited the local secondary school with the second of our prepared dramas involving the students from the college. This time we told the story of the Good Samaritan to the 500 or so gathered students and teachers. They do enjoy their drama out here - though I suspect our volunteer traveller may need prayer for healing as the robbers were almost too convincing in the delivery of their parts. The journey to and from the school was as enjoyable as the assembly as the students broke out into local worship songs drawing looks, waves and celebrations from those we passed. It was such an enjoyable time.

Our relationship with the students has grown in depth and we have really come to enjoy and understand one another. A real encouragement to me personally has been the sermon classes where these students have grown in confidence and ability. The language barrier has created some issues, but that which unites us is greater than that which divides! Our last day will be a very hard one, to say the least.

If I can trouble you for prayer again, I'd ask you to pray for the following:

Pray for Tim and I as we preach at the cathedral on Sunday - Tim at the English service and me at the main Muro service.

Pray that Tim and I can finish well. That includes the teaching as well as our leaving service on Monday afternoon where I will preside and Tim will preach - all in the college chapel.

Pray that relationships made can be fostered into the future in a meaningful way.

Please continue to pray for our health and protection whilst here.

Please continue to pray for the same for our families back home.

Pray for all the practical arrangements for our journeys next week to Juba, Nairobi and then home (which feels like an incredible statement to be making).

With love in Christ,

Jim