

Today's Martyrs – Athraa



Courtesy Open Doors UK

In September 2016 Open Doors UK published a remarkable interview with a young Iraqi woman named Athraa, who was driven from her home by the Islamic State (aka ISIL or IS). Her parents and six younger siblings had occupied their new home in Qaraqosh for one month when ISIL attacked and forced them to flee. They became refugees in their own land, joining hundreds of thousands in Kurdistan just miles from the front lines:

"The first months were a disaster. We lived in many different places. We lived in a wedding hall and a church garden. We ended up in a tent in a sports center. It was a really difficult. In the night I couldn't sleep because I heard the mice running around in my tent. There was not enough water and the food was not that good"

Athraa spoke about her family finally gaining a house which they share with another family, a situation she still calls "terrible" – but then smaller families must share a house with three or more families. Then she moved on to what else happened to her. She spoke "cautiously", perhaps because she could not believe it herself:

"I am glad that this happened because it changed my life. After the displacement I was bored, there was nothing to do, so I went to church more often. Soon I got involved with a Bible study group that gathers twice a week...I discovered that every line in the Bible tells us something. But what I like best is when we as a small group celebrate Holy Communion with the priest in the way the people in the time of Jesus did. We have a piece of bread and share that with each other. It is something wonderful. It gives me patience to continue my life, to see things from a bigger perspective..."

“We don't have to spend our time asking ourselves why this happened to us. God doesn't want to hurt us. He is speaking with us and we need to hear Him and trust Him. I learned that it's good to spend these days in prayer. IS took our land and our money, but we still have our lives and we have to live them like God wants us to. When you learn these things, you have to share them. I can help God to reach the people with his message. So I want to assist the people in my community to rediscover the richness of faith and I want to be there for them when they struggle...”

Athraa has become a church volunteer who helps seat the elderly during the packed Liturgies, which are usually standing room only. When not assisting others she stands in the aisles and sings. Of herself she said:

“I did go to church before my displacement, but I wasn't involved as much as I am now. I spent my time differently. I was an impatient person and always wanted to have things my way...I found a peace in my heart, peace in my life. God has made me a more patient and forgiving person. I know that God is with me and that's the most important thing.”

The full interview can be read at http://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/iraq_160907.php?ref=lnstorylnk

It is hard to say how people should respond at times such as described here. Certainly not everyone finds their faith strengthened as refugees: many suffer greatly, especially men who had provided for their families and the young who wish to marry and begin their families. But it is equally certain from this story that there are many Athraas, in fact Athraa benefited from being in their presence at Bible study and at Liturgy. Only *in extremis* is faith something we have alone with God; in most situations we share it and live it with many others. And sharing cannot happen unless we listen and speak, as Athraa has done so well.

Today's Martyrs
2490 Black Rock Turnpike #455
Fairfield CT 06825-2400
<http://todaysmartyrs.org/index.php/people/>

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