



How strange life is, at a time when I would have expected to be holding my sedate retirement party, how would I have ever guessed that my 64th birthday would be spent with Woynshet, sitting in her clay hut and eating the birthday cake she baked for me in a saucepan over the open fire?

It seemed paradoxical that as I moved to a much reduced income I began to sponsor a young girl in Ethiopia, for the duration of her education. Woynshet has a beautiful smile and a wonderful spirited outlook on life. She lived with her mother and younger sister in poor circumstances. Her mother worked 12 hours a day breaking up rocks on the road for which she was paid in handfuls of wheat. The wheat is given to the government in free world food aid. Her father died through lack of funds to get medical attention.

Marianne asked her what she would do with the first amount of money? She said she would get an electricity bulb in the hut so that she could study into the evening; buy a new front door in place of the piece of metal hanging off its hinges, have a window put in and a bed for all three of them (mother sister and self). But Marianne did not think there was enough room for a bed. The last line of Woynshet's letter to me said, 'They have got me when I was on the way to interrupt my education, even some times no coin for bread.' In other words my offer came just in time as she was having to leave school and presumably join her mother on the road for another handful of wheat.

Ethiopia is one of the poorest nations on earth and the poverty is extreme, yet such warm generous people who will share with strangers what little they have. I put up a photo on my wall of Woynshet sitting smiling on her mud floor, with the flies all around, and I determined to look at it each time I worried about my pension.

In October 2004, together with Marianne, we travelled to Ethiopia to visit the young people and to set up new sponsorships. On our first day we visited the District Administrative Officer to obtain children's names and details. He drew a register towards him opened it and said, 'I have the names of 1,300 of the poorest children how many sponsors do you have?' 'Three,' we said.

One sponsorship that we set up was for a young boy, Abebaw, who lived in the countryside outside of Lalibela. We took a mini bus until the road ran out where he met us to guide us to his village. We walked for a long while over rough goat tracks, up and down hills. Every time we saw a few huts we thought we had arrived until finally we stood on the edge of a cliff looking down into the valley where we could see the straw roofed huts in the distance. The altitude was very high and Marianne and I were both short of breath, the flies were buzzing around us and it was very hot. We agreed that if we climbed down we would probably never get back up the hill again. So Abebaw called across the valley to the village and eventually his granny, who he lived with having no parents, came out of the hut. 'Come down,' she kept calling, 'it's only five minutes, I will show you a quick way back to Lalibela.' 'How far' we asked? 'Only two and a half hours, she said, come my neighbour has bought fresh milk from the cow and I have the coffee ready.' Eventually, Granny who is a monk and walked the two and half hours each way to the church in Lalibela every day, came up the mountain followed by her neighbour carrying a large stone pitcher of milk on her shoulder. The neighbour then returned to the village only to come back up with 'injera' a flat pancake that, although their staple diet, has little nutritional value. We sat on the side of the hill as Marianne's sponsor son, Amdamarium, translated the new sponsor's letter to them. The sponsor works with guide dogs for the blind and also trains dogs to open doors for disabled people. 'That is very surprising,' said Granny, some country where even the dogs are educated.'



'He is my golden boy, she said of her grandson, but now I do not have to stay any longer'. She meant that now his future was assured she could go and stay permanently in the church and die in peace.

