

Sermon for Advent 3. St Brandon, Brancepeth. 12.12.21.

Today, the Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. The Latin “Gaudete,” means “rejoice”. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice’ St Paul urges us at the beginning of today’s first reading from Philippians 3. We are called to rejoice, to be joyful, in this Advent season we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That’s all very well, but we have been experiencing tough times these last 20 months. With suffering, loss and again uncertainty of another global wave of pandemic; and that’s before we reflect on the state of our beautiful and yet broken world. With all that in the back of our minds, how can we ‘rejoice’?

Well, the difficulty is because, for many of us, joy tends to overlap with happiness. And happiness is usually connected with what is happening to us and around us in the here and now. So when we are discouraged or afraid, ‘rejoicing in the Lord’ can be a hard sell. But the truth is that real joy is not usually inspired by happy circumstances, and joy, unlike happiness, lasts – no matter what the challenges.

The prophets, of whom John the Baptist is the last, looked forward to the day of the Lord’s coming as a time of ‘great joy’. St Paul was probably under house arrest when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. And still, Paul could say, “Rejoice in the Lord Always!”. We might wonder what he had to rejoice about in that situation? Well, Paul rejoiced because he looked forward to the Lord’s coming, but he also rejoiced because the Lord is always near. As we read parts of Acts and some of Paul’s letters, we see that Paul seemed to have

experienced the Lord's constant presence in his imprisonment. And so, he could say, "Rejoice!" He carried the joy of Advent with him wherever he went – even in a Roman jail.

I've only been to prison a few times, and some of my few visits have been through USPG. In the Philippines too, a few years ago, I visited a Bishop of USPG's partner church, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, who had been imprisoned. Bishop Carlo Morales, almost the same age as me, the new Bishop of Ozamiz, in the southern Island of Mindanao, in the Philippines. Mindanao, is one of the largest of the 7000 islands that make up the Philippines, and is a state in ruled under marshal law. Mindanao can be a dangerous place: peace activists are a threat to the marshal law, and relations between church and state are fractured.

Bishop Carlo, his wife – known by everyone as 'Darling', and their driver, were travelling in his rural diocese, when they stopped in the pouring rain, to offer a lift to a peace activist, Rommel Salinas, who was walking. Not long afterwards they were stopped by the police at a military check point, and then taken to the local police station.

Bishop Carlo, Darling and the driver were told they were free to go, but Bishop Carlo chose to stay with the peace campaigner; the Bishop knew that Salinas had done nothing wrong and wanted to stand up for him– so the police arrested them all, accusing them of being accomplices in harboring a criminal.

Their belongings were searched without any legal witnesses – and the police falsely claimed they had found a bomb in one of their bags. The bishop and his companions were put in a cell and were not allowed to talk in private to their lawyer.

Eventually, Darling and the driver were released but Bishop Carlo remained in prison on the false charge of illegal possession of explosives.

Five months later, I visited Bishop Carlo in Ozamiz Jail. I was the first non-Filipino to visit Bishop Carlo in jail, the first representative of the outside world church to pay attention to his cause; and my visit was of far more significance to either Bishop Carlo and his family, or to the Philippine Church than I had imagined. It wasn't me personally, it was the fact that someone, from the wider Anglican family had bothered to show an interest.

During the visit Bishop Carlo had been in good spirits. We struck a chord, discovering that we were both ordained on the same day – he inspired me with a Pauline kind of rejoicing: because he knew that the Lord was with him, and he was carrying the Advent hope that salvation would come to this situation. We had the kind of conversation not unlike many of the conversations that I had with other Bishops while I was there: sharing their hopes and plans for their dioceses, along with some of the frustrations. Until partway through the conversation, Bishop Carlo stopped and said, 'But I feel so useless stuck in here'. Here was a new bishop, full of enthusiasm, ideas and faith; stifled by the situation he had been placed in because he was standing in solidarity with a representative of the oppressed. He carried that Advent hope of God's near presence and the promise of salvation – but the darkness of the situation was all too real.

One year later, I returned to the Philippines and visited Bishop Carlo again. This time in his home. After 300 days, almost a year, in prison, he was released on bail. We continued the conversation we had begun a year earlier, this time in the comfort of his office, about his

diocese – and he had now been able to implement some of the ideas he shared with me a year before, and there were already signs of numerical growth in the number of parishes and mission stations in his care. And then we went to the prison – to visit Rommel Salinas, the Peace activist who was still there.

It must have been a strange experience for Bishop Carlo. We sat in the same overcrowded cell where he had spent almost a year, with mostly the same people in it. This was the first time Bishop Carlo had been back – though this time, of course, as a visitor. Some of his clergy had since established a prison visiting ministry there, but for Bishop Carlo himself, my visit prompted his first return. The hope, the prayer, and the action of the local church is that Romel, the peace activist, may also be released soon, but we'll have to wait and see; and that the charges against Bishop Carlo will be dropped. It's all rather on hold at the moment, because the judge who first imprisoned Bishop Carlo has since been murdered – such is the precarious state of violent law in that state.

'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice'. Bishop Carlo Morales revealed a new depth of meaning to St Paul's exhortation from prison to me, that I think will stay with me for a long time. USPG, through our partner churches across the Anglican Communion has the privilege of connecting with such remarkable people, journeying with them mission and ministry, and sharing something of their inspiring faith stories and engagements with others. Those stories are about justice, the climate crisis, gender, migration, interreligious living: every area in every context that the church is engaging with.. You can read about some of them, and how they live out and proclaim the Advent hope and joy, in the USPG publications, which are freely available to take away.

And thank you for your support – in prayer, action and financial giving – as USPG stands in solidarity with Anglicans across the world. Churches, literally the world over, are enabled live out their calling faithfully because of the support that USPG is able to share with them; and that support comes from parish churches, like St Brandan's. Thank you. And in our praying, our standing in solidarity, and in our giving, may we 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice!'. Amen.