

Homily to Prison Chaplains. Matthew 4 : 12 to 23

What an inspirational scriptures for us to reflect upon today. – The Light of Christ has come into the world.

In my training through Banyo seminary and Brisbane College of Theology almost 20 years ago, I picked up a simple formula for preaching : open with a story; link that to God story ; and then see how that speaks to the story of those who are listening . so that s what ill be doing !

When doing preparation for this, someone suggested: tell us something of your story, Gary. So I might offer that to you to start with, particularly in ways that it might echo with the situation and experiences that you face as prison chaplains, and give insight into chaplaincy in a another context .

I have spent the last 41 years engaged in institutions in one way or another . That started with four years at the Royal Military College of Duntroon, where for the first year, at least it seemed to us cadets that we were prisoners of a kind. The training was hard, the discipline strict, and for many months, we had no leave or contact with the outside world . There were so many aspects there that I didn't like, I tried to resign, but they wouldn't let you, and so I had to soldier on. Fortunately, things got better and in 1973, I graduated and went the Army as an infantry officer. Whilst at Duntroon, through the influence of chaplains and lay missionaries who came on base, I made a commitment to Christ and decided to live out my faith within the Catholic Church. The other significant things that I picked up at Duntroon were the value of mateship, and a beautiful girl by the name of Lynne Smith who I married . We have parented four wonderful children, two of whom are now army officers themselves and one of whom, Michael, has made a significant contribution to peace in East timor. He has been President Horta s right hand man for the last 3 years . Some of you may have seen him on two episodes of the Australian Story.

Later in my infantry career, I was taken prisoner again, this time by Hezbollah revolutionaries in the Islamic Republic of Iran, when I was commanding a peacekeeping force, in the darkness of the war between Iran and Iraq. My car was stopped by gunmen and I was grabbed and taken to a house where I was interrogated. It was a terrifying experience. My heart was racing; and I thought I was going to die. Worse than that, I was terrified of being tortured and feared how my family would cope with any range of scenarios that went through my mind. To cut a long story short at a break in my interrogation, I remembered that I should pray for God's protection. I blessed myself, said the prayer, and amazingly, one of my captors came up to me, pushed me out the door of the house and told me to go, go, go. Thanks be to God , I escaped with my life, but not without the trauma which later manifested itself as post traumatic stress disorder. Over the last 25 years I have worked at transforming that experience into a foundation for helping to heal traumatised people. I suspect many people you deal with , bear the hidden scars of trauma , let alone the anxiety of losing their freedom. They are unique experiences many will not understand .

Upon return from Iran. I accepted an invitation by Father John Tinkler, an Army chaplain to enter a scheme of training to become a married deacon in the Catholic Church, and subsequently serve as a chaplain in Defense. I was blessed to be received at Banyo Seminary by Father John Chalmers and be mentored by him into a new phase my life, which has been more exciting than the first.

In recent years, I had been deployed overseas numerous times to conflicts in Timor, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands , as well as ministering to victims of the Asian tsunami. For the last 7 years I have also been ministering part time to the AFP . In 2000 I founded a humanitarian organisation called Friends and Partners with East Timor and we have raised now about 1 million dollars in cash and have been delivering emergency assistance and human capacity development in health and education . In all these situations. I have tried to bring the light of Christ to people living in darkness. Ive generally used a simple ministry strategy in doing that : Through an active ministry of presence , Be friendly ; make a friend , and introduce that friend to Christ. Ive never had to badger people into believing . They normally ask me what this God stuff is all about , and I simply share my experience.

Of course some ministry settings are more challenging than others .

For a two-year period. I went back to be chaplain at Duntroon.

The environment there was even tougher than when I went through, and I faced the interesting dilemma I'm sure you all face in prisons where you are chaplains, both to the inmates and the staff. It was very easy for me to minister to the cadets, in training at Duntroon. They greatly appreciated my ministry of presence. It was much more challenging to be a minister to the staff. Most of them use the authority they had for empowerment, and for good, but of course there were those that use their power inappropriately. Some of them didn't like me coming around because it is exposed the darkness that they were involved in. And of course on many occasions. I acted as an advocate for cadets who were being treated inappropriately, and some people didn't like that. Of course we can't please everybody and as I'm sure you know how ministry both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Thank you for taking the knocks and wounds you have no doubt received in doing chaplaincy ministry. It seems it's a price we will pay for this ministry .

With that story of mine on the table , its time to move to Gods story today . At the outset I have the utmost respect for what you do as chaplaincy in prisons, because truly, you too are the light of Christ, that goes into dark places- both the dark places of peoples hearts that might be traumatized or burdened by sin , as well as the dark places of institutions.

Of course ,the people of God have journeyed through darkness and light throughout history. In our scriptures today , the prophet Isaiah was something of a prison chaplain himself in encouraging the oppressed people of Israel that God had not forsaken them and would eventually break the yokes that bound them, and deliver them into the light.

Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah to set prisoners free, and called others to follow him, in being bearers of light in the dark places of his society. He called Peter and Andrew, James and John and went off bringing good news and healing people wherever they went. Whilst they kept focused on the mission, it seems that they did some great work. They transformed the lives of not only those people living under the oppression of Roman authorities and unjust civil and religious leaders, but they transformed the lives of some of those institutional authority figures as well.

When we move into the letters of St. Paul, we find the early Christian church becoming institutionalized itself, with divisions and differences developing. I don't know what, if any, divisions you might be experiencing within your denominational churches, or within your chaplaincy teams, but division and disunity is death giving to any work of the Holy Spirit that we might hope would be with us. Whilst I have ministered in recent years in the most extraordinary conflict situations on an international stage, nothing has been more painful and more difficult for me personally than instances of division or disunity caused by individuals within interdenominational chaplaincy teams or within my own church., back here within the relative safety of Australia. Don't get me wrong, I've had many positive experiences, but wherever I have witnessed disunity, its as if Gods Spirit pulls back from the ministry until we restore unity. Peace and unity are two sides of the one coin. Peace and unity are inseparable ingredients for good ministry

My ministry in circumstances of disunity has drawn me back to implement the advice of St. Paul in today's reading, to work towards being completely united with only one thought and one purpose to tell the good news of Jesus Christ; and to focus on that mission. Once we restore that focus and primacy on Gods mission, sometimes the points of order being disputed can be seen in better perspective.

I don't presume to be able to give you any advice on how to be better prison chaplains. I'm sure the Holy spirit will reveal that to you through both the formal and informal experiences of your conference. Of course I would want to commend to you Fr Kevin Ryans final contribution to the Catholic leader, as it has some brilliant insights into seeing the good in those that hurt us, and remembering how all people are loved by God, even when God is wanting and inviting them to change. Some great insights there.

But may I offer you a few thoughts on chaplaincy ministry in general. Firstly I do want to thank you for your service and affirm you in this ministry of the Gospel. More than ever we all have an important ministry of evangelization to be involved in. No less than Peter and Andrew, James and John, we are called to follow Jesus in being Good News and bringing good news to those we meet. We can take comfort that Jesus is already present in the prisons and places of ministry we go. Our task is to help people realize that, by our physical presence, our actions and sometimes our words.

I'm sure that God desires, that we have a deep desire, that all people may know the Love of God, the grace and salvation of Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. If that attitude and enthusiasm is within us, we won't need a lot of words. Like the prisoners, we too will be scared at times. That's when we need to listen to our own preaching. We

know that the Light of Christ will always prevail. We've already experienced that in our own life experiences. Maybe that's one method of evangelization – sharing your story, leading into God's story, and linking that with their story. Because invariably God will have already been speaking to their hearts. You can be there to help remind them of those encounters. And know God's mission doesn't depend on us alone. We are ministers not messiahs. We are companions for a time on the journey of life of others. A chap contacted me last week that I hadn't heard from in 35 years. He'd been a soldier in my first platoon. He simply said: I want you to be happy to hear I've finally got baptized!! Of course I was happy! I must have made some contribution in his life for him to contact me, but others must have done so as well.

I see God's personal call for me is to raise up soldiers of Christ to transform the society they live in. I will try to be light, and bring them light, and pass that light on to others. If any of you saw scope to help us in the military mission, I'd be pleased to share more about it.

May you continue to be the light of Christ in your situations. May you take that light into the darkness and be confident that the darkness will never overcome it. I'd encourage you all to focus on and be united in the mission you see yourself called to, remembering we are co-workers with Christ who has gone before us. God loves you and calls you to his mission. Go in peace as bearers of the light.