

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

8th Sunday in Pentecost
July 25, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Faith Behind the Wire”

In the South China Sea, there is a small island called Chung Chau. It lies over an hour from the Chinese mainland and it never had any importance apart from fishing. In July of 1986, I set out by boat to go to Chung Chau. With me I took a Vietnamese girl named Mai Ling.

As my small boat bounced across the waves, the day was gray, misty, and rainy. After an hour, Chung Chau loomed into view like a long thin snake on the horizon. Mai Ling told me “that there were normally hills behind, but today they were shrouded in the midst.” As we approached, I saw a wooden jetty running out into the sea. But it was what lay on the flat piece of land just in front of the harbor that caught your eye, and took you by surprise.

From several hundred yards out, the mists around the island split and there rising into the air were four towers just like the ones you remember from a second world war “prisoner” of war camp. They were occupied by guards staring down at us and armed with guns. Below them were the high wire fences surrounding the camp topped with rolling barbed wire. Inside the wire were some twenty-four long metal sheds or cabins built close together.

We disembarked and had to go into a small building to have our papers checked and be searched. Then a guard escorted us to the main gate. As we passed along the fence, hundreds and hundreds of people crowded against the wire to get a look at us. There were lots of children of all ages, women with babies, old people with their faces wrinkled by the sun. Only the young men stood apart grouped at the side of the long hub; many of them were smoking.

As we were let through the big gates and led down a path towards the huts, the children crowded round us on all sides. They were just like children everywhere with big smiles, and white, white teeth, laughing and holding fast to plastic toys, soccer balls, and the like. They were dressed in an array of tee shirts of every color and shorts. Eventually we got to one of the huts and entered. The light was poor in there because it had no windows; just double open doors at each end.

When my eyes became accustomed to the light, I saw rows of double bunk beds down both sides of the hut. There was no space between the beds and families above or below had draped blankets between the beds to give themselves privacy and personal belongings hung from the walls and ceiling. An aisle ran the whole length of the hut with the beds on both sides. At one end they had placed a table with a white tablecloth for me to celebrate the Eucharist. As I got changed into vestments, people began to gather sitting on beds, and squatting around the altar and in the aisles.

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Mai Ling unpacked the guitar and sang some kind of folk hymn, and suddenly, the hut was filled with hundreds of voices singing in Vietnamese. Crowds gathered outside peering in. As we began the liturgy, every word I said in English was echoed by Mai Ling in Vietnamese. Sometimes she would look over at me, especially during the sermon, and I would slow down or stop. Then she would chatter on with a great flow of words in her own language. Sometimes the children would smile or laugh or whisper to each other. The adults largely remained still and silent or nodded reverently.

After the sermon, an elderly man stood up and began to talk. Mai Ling translated; everyone else remained silent. This is what he said: “We are Christians from Vietnam. Our forefathers were converted to the faith by French missionaries many years ago. We have always been a minority in our own country living in villages and on the coast. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, life became very difficult for us. The communists tore down our churches and forced us to attend their meetings. They tried to brain wash us and kill the faith within us. Many were thrown into prison and forced to work in camps or in the fields. When things got too bad we decided to leave and slipped away in our boats by night. The boats were always going to be too small for the South China Sea. So we grouped them together with ropes, and with paddles, and sailed – we went northeast. The journey for many was perilous and we hoped that like others, we would be picked up by the British Navy as we neared Hong Kong. And that is what happened. Up until 1981, we were allowed to live and work in Hong Kong, but then the Chinese Government put pressure on the British and we were moved here. Here we have languished, waiting for countries to adopt us and give us a home. We are not in despair because we have our faith and we know that God has not forgotten us and will never desert us. Here we wait as the people of Israel waited in the Old Testament for our deliverance. Already many of our young people have been taken to Australia, South Africa, France, England, and Canada. We want you to tell our fellow Christians in the West that we are a part of the Body of Christ, too, and tell them to pray for us.”

The old man’s words met with many nods of heads, and everyone seemed to sing for the rest of the service with even more gusto.

Our journey back to the mainland left much time for reflection. It was the first of many trips to Chung Chau we made that summer. Everything we saw and heard spoke to us of faith, hope, and the Gospel. There was in that poor desolate place no despair or sadness, and the words of today’s Gospel have followed me down the years reminding me of these joyful Christians behind the wire.

“Knock and the door will open, seek and you will find, ask and you’ll be given.”

Jesus words have an endless truth. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

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What we call faith, what St. Paul calls faith cannot just be a list of believers. It has to be more than that. Faith has to be a step into the dark, knowing your God is here to catch you. Faith must be a hope against hope – a trust that God is truly the compass of your life, guiding you to the place he wants you to be.

“Faith of our fathers holy faith we will be true to thee till death!”

When the people of Israel dwelled in Egypt, when they were nomads in the desert, they lived lives of desperation. But in the middle of that desperation, they had great faith and great hope. The story of Abraham is a story of faith. Our faith story has to be a story of hope. It must be a story that has vision and future.

The second reading today tells Christians that now they have received Christ; they must live in him. Nothing, neither philosophy nor the culture of the world, should ever be allowed to separate us from Christ and his way. We cannot fill our lives with pettiness or be distracted by things that are temporary and do not last. Christianity is about life and death; pain and suffering, but also hope and glory.

Episcopalians are people who seek out problems and try to solve them. Episcopalians look to the poor and offer hope. Episcopalians sing all their hymns as if they are proclamations of their faith.

Real Christians come to church on Sunday to worship God. That worship contains praise and thanksgiving – but it is also spirit filled. And it is that gift of the Spirit that they carry out into the community and into the world. Church attendance for Christians is tapping into the power and the love of God and bringing that love to others!

We do not live on a tiny island in the South China Sea. We do not live imprisoned behind wire with the same routine day after day, year after year. Yet there is a lesson here for all of us. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will see what miracles are.

Today, wake up to the beauty of our Delaware Valley and praise God in his creation. Today, take the words of Jesus into your heart and own them. Today, look not back at the road you have come, but forward into the “what can be of your life!” and leap forward in your own particular faith story to fulfill those dreams you had packed away for such a long, long time.

Let us pray.

Father, your Kingdom come, your will be done!

May your Spirit rest upon our shoulders.

Give us the gift of faith that we may dream and wake and step closer to your kingdom here on earth.

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Amen+

Guide our efforts with the depths of your wisdom. Bring healing to our sick and hope to those who despair. May our children walk in your way and our hearts follow the Gospel way.

Amen+

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