

14 December 2014

The last part of my sabbatical was a religion and theology conference in San Diego at the end of November. The seminars I attended on various topics of Church history and theology were interesting. However, the absolute highlight of the conference was an address given by former US president Jimmy Carter. Jimmy Carter's term ended in 1981 and very few people of the present generation remember him or his presidency. But it was an absolute delight to hear him address a packed auditorium.

Jimmy Carter is 90 years of age but looks, acts and speaks like a person in their early 60s. He is a committed Christian and still teaches Sunday school in his small Baptist church in the state of Georgia. While most US presidents have a library named after them, this ex-president chose to start the Jimmy Carter Center to tackle a number of major global issues. Firstly, he is dedicated to world peace, especially in the Middle East. Secondly, he is dedicated to eliminating disease in the poorest parts of the world. He told the story of an African country needing some money to eliminate water-borne disease. He went to a wealthy business man in New York to ask for \$100,000. When the business man asked what the money was for, Jimmy Carter explained that it was for plastic protective covers to keep fresh water from becoming contaminated. Thinking that his mission was not successful, Jimmy Carter later discovered that rather than simply giving the money, the business man was so moved by what he had heard, he rang all his friends in industry and manufacturing and arranged for thousands of kilometres of this plastic resin to be made for free and sent to Africa to help protect dozens of towns and villages. This project cost far in excess of the initial \$100,000. Thousands of lives have been saved by this extraordinary act of generosity. As Jimmy Carter spoke, you could hear a pin drop in the auditorium.

Carter also spoke about what his foundation is doing for the environment, for climate change for promoting the better use of energy in the world. But what really moved people to tears was Jimmy Carter talking about his work in terms of tackling violence against women, promoting education and eliminating the evil of international human trafficking, especially of young teenage women. He called human trafficking a modern form of slavery and his passionate call for action resulted in a standing ovation where the audience clapped and clapped

and clapped, so inspired by the vision, energy and basic human decency of this ninety-year-old former president.

I mention all this because in today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah is talking about setting people free from darkness, from slavery, from oppression and violence. The prophet speaks of a time of freedom, joy and hope and those filled with the spirit of the Lord commit themselves to this enterprise of announcing and promoting God's kingdom. An auditorium of almost 4,000 people saw the spirit of the Lord at work in the life of Jimmy Carter. Rather than sitting at home writing his memoirs and making lots of money on the international speaking circuit, Jimmy Carter is committed at ninety years of age to bring good news to our world, just like the prophets of the Old Testament. When someone asked Carter if perhaps he was a little too optimistic about fixing some of these major world problems, he responded by quoting the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu; 'I am a prisoner of hope'.

The Advent and Christmas season is about hope. John the Baptist is called to prepare the way of the one who is the hope of the world and the Prince of Peace. He came as a witness to speak for the light. If a ninety-year-old former president can do so much, what are we doing in the crazy Christmas season that brings hope, joy, light and good news in the lives of others? Perhaps a food parcel that the parish can use, a donation to St Vincent de Paul or a donation to the work of the Melbourne Overseas Mission, a special collection taken up this weekend where one Melbourne priest died in a tragic plane crash and another priest became a paraplegic trying to bring good news to a remote village in Papua New Guinea.

The light of these advent candles calls each of us to be 'prisoners of hope' just like the prophet Isaiah, just like John the Baptist, just like Jimmy Carter. Why? '...because the spirit of the Lord has been given to me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken and to proclaim liberty to captives'.