

FREE

Indeed

Text by / THE REV DREW COURTRIGHT

It had been 7 months since I had been inside a prison. The last time was at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York in December 2024. I celebrated a final eucharist with 12 women at this maximum-security prison where I had been a visiting chaplain for 18 months. I had been feeling a little guilty about 'leaving' them to move to Hong Kong, but they surprised me with their excitement and genuine happiness for me. That's when it dawned on me that, for these inmates, anytime someone leaves prison, it's a good thing!

And so, as I walked up to Stanley Prison with the Revd Will Newman and 7 young adults from the Life Enrichment Centre, I knew I was covered in prayer from my last prison visit. This time, going into a men's facility in Hong Kong was very different. Different guards, different doors, different sights, different inmates. Yet, despite these superficial differences, there was still one thing that was exactly the same—the inmates we visited were so thankful that we were there. Having visitors is a great gift to inmates who see those same guards, doors, sights, and fellow inmates all day, every day. The monotony, I'm told, can really wear one down. But having visitors mixes it up, breaks the routine, and is like a breath of fresh air. It lifts the spirit and brings relief.

That's true of God, too. Before God came to visit us in His Son Jesus Christ, humanity was imprisoned under the Law by the consequences of Sin. Nothing we could do—no amount of good works, religious ritual, or even spiritual tomfoolery—could ever open the doors to freedom. We needed relief from outside. And so, the Holy Visitor came not only to break the monotony but to break the chains and to set us free through His death and resurrection. And THAT is the message that truly lifts the spirits of literal and figurative prisoners. Visiting is great, but sharing with one another how God's freeing spirit is at work in or outside the facility—that is what makes prison ministry so powerful for inmate and visitor alike.

Therefore, we rejoice in the words of Jesus found in John's gospel: 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.' (John 8. 36)



Drew with inmate Sara K. At her Confirmation with Bishop Mary Glasspool

