

February 9, 2014 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Sr. Mary Grenough, MM, Myanmar

Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9; First Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

“...[W]hen I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom... so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” – First Corinthians 2: 1-5

Very truly, when I came to Myanmar in 2006 at the age of 71, I could easily agree with St. Paul: that I could claim no show of oratory or philosophy. I could not speak or understand Burmese or any of the languages of the people (and continue to be extremely limited in language ability), but felt a definite call to leave my almost 40 years of mission in the Philippines to go to Myanmar.

The people among whom I have lived for the past eight years here in Myanmar welcomed me, and I began to learn from their example the power of faith in a new way. This year, Myanmar is celebrating its 500th anniversary of the coming of its first Catholic missionaries. I have found a deep faith paid for dearly by the early mostly French, Portuguese, Irish and U.S. missionaries in sacrifice of shipwreck, rejection, sickness, war and death – but who continued until many of the ethnic peoples learned to discover God, Jesus Christ, as a loving Creator and Savior who became human like us, in place of fearful spirits and mysterious uncontrollable powers. They translated Scripture into Burmese languages.

Even without learning to understand or speak Burmese, I (as a nurse) could well understand the reality of HIV and AIDS, its consequences on the health of a people who lacked awareness of its cause or treatment but knew of its painful and fatal consequences when untreated.

My invitation and challenge was to start a network for education and cooperation among Catholics for responding to the growing plague of HIV and AIDS in Myanmar. In 2010 the Myanmar Catholic HIV and AIDS Network began.

The first parish group which started a shelter for people living with HIV and AIDS named itself “The Guiding Star.” From its beginning, it was open to everyone with HIV and AIDS regardless of ethnic origin or religion. Truly, it is a guiding star. Based in Yangon, its membership grew from about 12 to 40 and it includes peoples of different ethnic origins and religious beliefs.

It has become the light of life to its members. Religious and ethnic barriers have disappeared as members shared their life stories and helped each other. People are welcomed and helped by co-members who understand their stigma, rejection, and who can introduce them to services for life-giving medicines.

In Isaiah 58:7-10 we are told to “loose the bounds of injustice.” This is happening! As people learn to understand the cause and treatment of HIV and AIDS, the stigma and discrimination which is so crippling, melts away. Recently, a group of potential donors visited the Guiding Star group, and one of the visitors asked a 14-year old boy who was with the group, “Is your mother positive for HIV and AIDS?” I was very uncomfortable because the questions should not have been asked.

But David, without rancor or anger answered simply, “She is my mother.” What a testimony of trust, and love! I hope it wasn’t wasted. His mother was infected by her husband “who loved drugs more than her” and who died of AIDS when their first child was two years old.

His mother is now a member of our staff and is educating others to understand how to prevent HIV and AIDS and how to treat those already infected with respect and compassion.

She and so many other Myanmar co-workers are teaching me to “loose the bounds of injustice” and “to let the oppressed go free.” (Isaiah 58:6)

“Here I am.” (Isaiah 58:9)