

## Christmas where you'd least expect it

In his parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46), Jesus condemns, among others, those who have not visited him in prison (v. 43) . . . i.e., those who have not visited "the least of these" in prison. But even Jesus, it seems, had not contemplated a country where folk *want* to visit prisoners, but are not allowed to do so, in spite of determined attempts. NGOs dedicated to solidarity with prison inmates, supposedly the "sheep", as much as prison authorities, often make it difficult, sometimes impossible, for folk to visit prison inmates.

That is how it had become with AEIPES over the summer, first for visitors from the north wanting to accompany our prison program, but whose applications the AEIPES director refused to process (sign, stamp and scan to prison authorities). Then in August AEIPES members ourselves were blocked from working in all three prisons where we had been conducting a weekly program with groups of 15-40 inmates (one of these three had become almost impossible to enter some months earlier, for a complex set of "reasons", mostly blaming the inmates themselves, which later turned out to be less-than-credible justifications). Though we haven't received any official reason for this current lock-out, we speculate that it might be the result of official censure for a street protest conducted by the AEIPES director over the transferral of his base group--his prison inmate friends from the 90's--from the central prison to a newer, higher security prison. This barrier sprung up too late in the year for our formal application to continue our prison program through another organization to be considered by the prison authorities for this calendar year. Hopefully, 2016 will bring a more encouraging response, and we'll all be transferred back to the "sheep" side of Jesus' parable, along with visitors who hope to join us in visiting prison inmates.

In spite of this setback, 2015 ended with two most memorable prison visits, well-accompanied by 10 other members of *IPAZ* (Pastoral Initiative for Life and Peace), about which I've written on occasion (see <http://luterano.blogspot.com/search/label/IPAZ> ). Our mission is to promote dialogue with different sectors of Salvadoran society, particularly the much-marginalized, much-maligned (well-deserved, most-all? --would say) gang sector, both in their prison wards / cells, and in their territories / neighbourhoods / *barrios*. A couple weeks ago, soccer tournaments were held in a couple conflictive gang neighbourhoods, hosted by *IPAZ* and local youth. These celebratory, promising barrier-breaking

activities were followed up with these most worthwhile prison visits, to carry out our pastoral Gospel mandate to visit Jesus, by visiting God's people, especially those behind bars.

While the prison spaces we visited--some new to me, even after 21 years, and a couple thousand visits to Salvadoran prisons--had none of the charm of a Bethlehem stable as we imagine and image it in Western culture . . .

. . . and while the only Christmas-y reminder was a Nativity scene on the parking lot side of one prison entry office . . . (unlike one gang prison where the soccer court wall was artfully adorned--now painted over--with a traditional nativity scene, surrounded by Los Angeles gang culture, as a backdrop for gang homeboy soccer games . . . here, paint for such art is prohibited) . . .

. . . meeting with groups of inmates, and chatting with many individuals, dozens of them friends from across the spectrum of over 2 decades of providing workshops in a dozen Salvadoran prisons (and they do have phenomenal memories for any and all workshop details, such as Jessica's songs, e.g.!) . . .

. . . did give me a very Christmas sense of Jesus being born, being present, in this least likely of human spaces, born, present and alive in the hearts and lives of these whom "humanity", society, even the church, have pushed to the margins, excluded and isolated. As reported in a TV interview last week by a reputable government functionary deeply affected by all the violence in the country, inmates entering such a prison are warned that the Constitution--even God--*do not* enter here.

Yet, I wasn't too surprised to find God already present in even these prisons. As I've reflected previous Christmases, such a space, such a crowd, to me, is a true "Christ-mass", or, perhaps more appropriately (considering the 367% overcrowding in Salvadoran prisons), an authentic "Jesus-horde".

May you celebrate and ponder a heart-changing "Jesus-horde" this holy-day season, and always.

Following the Christmas--Jesus-horde--star, wherever it might lead,

*Brian*

Rev. Brian Rude, DD

"In Mission with El Salvador", *"En Misión con El Salvador"*,

Alberta and the Territories Synod, ELCIC