



Dear Friends,

Attending the chapel service at Silverwater Correctional Complex last week was both moving and deeply encouraging.

As each woman arrived, they signed in with their name and prison ID number. For us volunteers, it offered a brief but precious moment to smile, say hello, and welcome each one into the service. One woman quietly asked if we could pray with her afterwards, as she was being released the following day. Some had been to Chapel before; many were new, on remand and waiting to be sentenced.

There is always a nervous energy at the beginning. Uncomfortable faces. Very little eye contact. Restless fidgeting.

The Chaplain spoke about not always getting what you want, the way you want it — but never losing hope. She spoke of the hope Jesus offers, a hope that reaches beyond prison walls and remains long after sentences end. A hope found in coming to the One who offers something real and lasting.

As she spoke, I found myself praying that God's Holy Spirit would gently quiet hearts across the room.

Partway through the service, a very young woman sitting at the back beckoned me over. She whispered that she wanted to leave — that this wasn't for her. I stepped outside to ask the guard if she could return to her cell. "Which one?" he asked. I pointed her out. "No, she has to stay," he replied. "I can't take just one back."

I returned and awkwardly told her she would need to remain. When I asked why she didn't want to stay, she said softly, "I can't read." She wasn't able to follow the printed order of service.

"Oh, that's okay," I reassured her. "You can just listen. There's beautiful music, and we'll share morning tea afterwards."

I don't know all the reasons the women come to the Chapel service. Some, perhaps, for time away from their cells. Some, I imagine, longing for forgiveness for what they've done. But in one way or another, they are all looking for hope.

After the sermon, the women prayed aloud — for safe homes when they are released, for children waiting outside, and humbly, even prayers of thanks for us volunteers who had come along to join the service.

As Bette Midler's song "The Rose" played while communion was shared, several women rose to receive the bread. Then to conclude the service, we sang the wonderful hymn, "How Great Thou Art" handing out small packs of biscuits prepared for morning tea.

I glanced to the back of the Chapel and saw the young woman who had wanted to leave. She was happily eating a Tim Tam and looked noticeably more at ease.

I don't know what was taking place in her heart that morning — or in the hearts of any of the women in the room. But I do know this: the hope spoken about that day is the same hope offered to every one of us.

It is the hope found in Jesus — in the God who loved the world so deeply that He sent His Son. A hope that is not limited by prison walls, life circumstances, or past mistakes. A hope that meets us where we are, walks with us through today, and carries us into eternity.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." — Romans 15:13

God Bless,
Annette De Gouveia