

Aung San Suu Kyi awarded the Freedom of Newcastle

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." **Luke 4:18-19**

"Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent."

Martin Luther King Jr.

On the evening of Friday 17th June, I was privileged and honoured to attend the ceremony at Newcastle Civic Centre where Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Freedom of Newcastle. I had first proposed this a few years ago, so was somewhat surprised, although delighted, when I heard the news in March that the award was going to be given. The important thing was to make sure that the ceremony garnered as much publicity as possible and could be part of the wider struggle for freedom and democracy in Burma. How did this happen and why did I decide to put forward Aung San Suu Kyi for the freedom of a city 6 000 miles away from where she lives?

To answer the second of those questions first, I tried to explain my reasons during the ceremony, which began with me outlining why I had proposed Daw Suu Kyi.

The award was one of a line of awards given to major figures such as Nelson Mandela in the past. Aung San Suu Kyi was the world's most prominent political prisoner until her release from house arrest on 13th November 2010. The news of the award would hopefully reach Burma and would help to keep up the pressure on the military regime there and remind them that the world is watching them and how they treat Aung San Suu Kyi and the rest of the population of Burma. It is never easy to tell exactly what effect such awards have on a situation so far away, but a few years after Nelson Mandela was given the award, he was released from Pollsmoor Prison and a few years later he became the President of a democratic South Africa.

It was also a recognition of the huge amount of work on human rights in Burma which takes place in Newcastle and the wider NE, including the strong support from trade unions and churches in the region. The people of

Newcastle should be proud of the work for human rights across the world, including Burma, which is undertaken in the city.

The award is also part of a rich and proud tradition of people in Newcastle and the NE supporting human rights' struggles throughout the world, going back as least as far as the anti-slavery movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 1854, the Italian Independence leader Garibaldi visited Newcastle and met with his many supporters. Next time you are near the Monument in Newcastle City centre, try to find a small plaque on the corner of Newlson Street and the top end of Grainger Street. This plaque celebrates the link between Garibaldi and Newcastle. 7 years after visiting Newcastle, Garibaldi led his country to freedom; hopefully Aung San Suu Kyi will soon do the same for her people in Burma. In 1792, one-third of the population of Newcastle signed an anti-slavery petition and helped to bring about the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the British Empire. Burma is now the forced labour capital of the world and people in Newcastle are rising to the challenge again, to end the scourge of slavery.

I was delighted with the publicity that the award was given. I am an honorary member of the Newcastle chapel of the NUJ and one of the members, who teaches on a Masters degree course at Newcastle University, asked me if some of his students could cover the event. I replied yes! Three students duly came along and filmed the event and interviewed Wai Hninn, from the Burma Campaign, who had come to collect the award, the Lord Mayor Geoff O'Brien, and myself. Wai Hninn had spoken just after me in the ceremony and had noted that, "Suu Kyi is a symbol of freedom. She is not only Burma's leader - she is our mother. If Suu Kyi could come here she would say to people in the UK in general, and Newcastle in particular, 'Please use your freedom to campaign for democracy and human rights in Burma'". Wai Hninn, a 22-year old student and activist had her own personal reasons for asking for this; her father is currently serving a 65-year prison sentence for his own activism for freedom and democracy and Wai Hninn does not expect to see him again.

This quote along with other information was sent out across the wires, courtesy of the Associated Press and found its way to the websites of the Belfast Telegraph, Liverpool Echo, London Evening Standard and even the Daily Star, as well as a number of publications abroad. Closer to home, The Journal took up most of page 29, with a photograph of Aung San Suu Kyi and the story of the event and quotes from the Lord Mayor and myself.

Perhaps most importantly of all, Burmanet News covered the story, so it is likely that both Aung San Suu Kyi and the SPDC military regime in Burma found out about it. It was also featured on Aung San Suu Kyi's facebook page.

One other thing that encouraged me to propose Aung San Suu Kyi for the Freedom of Newcastle and particularly appeals to me about the courageous and non-violent stand which she has made these past 23 years, since she became involved in the 1988 uprising, is that I believe that she is part of a tradition, a cycle of spirituality which has ancient roots. If one thinks of the message of love and non-violence which was preached by Jesus on the shores of the Lake of Galilee and especially during the Sermon on the Mount, one can see how that message has resonated down the centuries to the present day.

The message of the Sermon on the Mount was picked up by a Hindu in the early years of the 20th century, as he built a movement for the non-violent overthrow of the British Empire in his native India. Some 20 or so years later, a Christian pastor in the southern states of America, was sufficiently influenced by the work of this Indian, along with his own Christian faith, to successfully launch a non-violent struggle for freedom and equality for black people in the USA. Both these people have similarly influenced Aung San Suu Kyi.

In this respect, Fergal Keane has noted after conversations with Suu Kyi, that

"implicit in every statement she makes, personal or political, is an absolute dedication to the ideals of freedom and justice. Burma's is a 'spiritual revolution' she says. When Aung San Suu Kyi talks about democracy it is with the kind of conviction and passion not often heard in our age. Hers is a voice that transcends the materialist scramble of modern Asia. There are constant echoes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King." (1)

Aung San Suu Kyi, is of course a deeply spiritual person in her own right, a devout Buddhist whose own spiritual values greatly inform her policy of seeking a non-violent end to Burma's misery. Like Gandhi and King, she also has very practical reasons for this:

"Military coups, which have happened enough in Burma, are violent ways of changing situations and I do not want to encourage and to

perpetuate this tradition of bringing about change through violence. Because I am afraid that if we achieve democracy in this way, we will never be able to get rid of the idea that you bring about necessary changes through violence. The very method would be threatening us all the time. Because there are always people who do not agree with democracy. And if we achieve it through violent means there will be the hard core of those who have always been against the democracy movement who will think, 'it was through violence that they changed the system and if we can develop our own methods of violence, which are superior to theirs, we can get back their power.' And we'll go on with this vicious cycle." (2)

This is a timely reminder that those ideals of non-violence and love which Jesus preached 2 000 years ago were not the woolly-minded they are sometimes portrayed as, but rather words of deep wisdom which have as much relevance today as ever. Let us hope that it is these same ideals which can propel Aung San Suu Kyi and her people to freedom and democracy and also heal the wounds in the troubled nation of Burma. And perhaps, just perhaps, being given the Freedom of Newcastle will have helped push the people of Burma just that tiny bit further down the road to their own promised land.

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Footnotes:

1. F. Keane, *Letter to Daniel*, p. 209
2. *Index on Censorship*, Volume 26 p. 165-6