

Free to Give: 3 Lives

Luke 3:7-20

In early 2015, student leader Phyo Phyo Aung helped to organize a march against a new law in Myanmar, which students said limited academic freedom. In March, as the protesters got closer to Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, they were blocked by police who beat them with batons.

Phyo Phyo Aung and more than 100 other student activists – many of them injured – were arrested and charged with a range of questionable criminal offences. Many have been locked up ever since, with some held in solitary confinement and with limited access to lawyers. Some, including Phyo Phyo Aung, could face more than nine years in prison.

Across the country, young people and student leaders continue to be harassed by police and other authorities in what appears to be a systematic clampdown on the student movement. Despite this, there is good reason to believe the authorities can be pressured into releasing Phyo Phyo Aung and others.

Student Israa Al-Taweel was arrested on 1 June 2015 and taken to the National Security office in central Cairo, where she was blindfolded and interrogated about links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Israa had no chance to contact a lawyer or her family – who for 15 days were desperately looking for her in police stations, courts and prisons. She is now held in Al-Qanater prison, accused of 'belonging to a banned group' and 'broadcasting false news'.

In January 2014, Israa was shot in the lower back at a protest. The injury left her unable to walk and she uses a wheelchair. Her condition has begun to improve with physiotherapy, but is deteriorating now that she is no longer receiving treatment.

John the Baptist was a Jewish itinerant preacher. He is a major religious figure in Christianity, Islam and the Bahai Faith. John is a prophet in all of these religious traditions and is regarded as a saint by many Christian denominations. He used baptism as the central sacrament or symbol of his messianic movement.

Like Phyo Phyo and Israa, John was a prisoner of conscience because he too was a threat to the regime of the day. With his message of repentance, justice and hope. His message speaks to us at this time of war, injustice and fear, but also this time of Advent when we prepare for the birth of our Jesus, our Messiah.

This is the time to appreciate our freedom; our freedom to speak, act and worship; the freedom to give of ourselves so that others can be free, so that the world can be released from its fear, hatred and conflict, so that the world can repent.

So let us hear the message of John, which echoes in the lives of Phyo Phyo, Israa and many prisoners of conscience, when he says, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8a) because God's plan is to change the world.

Neil Johnson (December 2015)