

Recently the Communist Party of China celebrated its 100-year anniversary. And while we might be flooded with Chinese imports, I think it's easy to lose sight of just how tyrannical China in fact is.

But in spite of all this, there are some who are a beacon of hope, modern day prophets who point to something greater.

Christopher Bedford, a reporter, recently did a profile of one of these prophets, a billionaire who is sacrificing everything because he does not worship the false god of the Communists. He worships the one true God.

In Hong Kong right now, Jimmy Lai is sacrificing all — his fortune and possibly his life — for his God, his fellow man, and for freedom.

Lai is a billionaire, although he wasn't always one. Born two years before the Communists defeated the nationalists in China's civil war, his father fled and his mother was sent to a labor camp when he was a young child.

Carrying bags for train passengers and getting by as a street vendor, he first tasted freedom when a man from British Hong Kong gave him a bar of chocolate.

Lai is a British citizen, although he wasn't always one. Having seen a glimpse of prosperity and freedom, he chased it to the then-free British island colony, stowing away aboard a ship when he was just 12 years old and working on the floor of a clothing factory.

Lai is a Catholic, although he wasn't always one. He met the faith through his wife, a pious woman he accompanied to church, where he heard the homilies of Cardinal Joseph Zen and in 1997 was baptized into the church by the same great man.

Today Lai is in a prison cell in Hong Kong, and the Communist dictatorship has once again seized one of his life's works, shutting down his newspaper. But of all that has changed since he was a young boy, persecution by the communists has remained a constant. If you stand by your faith, in China there's no way around it. "I have a soul," he said in early 2019, and so the truth lives in him.

Recently he said: "No one can say we didn't fight... Prison life is the pinnacle of my life. I am completely at peace."

Lai's path to success in Hong Kong began on the floor of a garment factory. He rose quickly, eventually joining management. He saved his money, invested in the stock market, and used the profits to buy a factory and start making clothing for middle-class consumers.

After the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, where peaceful pro-democracy protesters were trapped, shrouded in darkness, and run over and gunned down by tanks, Lai sacrificed his stake in his mainland business by printing and selling pro-democracy shirts and starting a tabloid magazine that covered scandal and corruption in the party.

Undeterred by his loss, and still a very wealthy man, Lai channeled his time and fortune toward fighting their evil, enduring arrest, persecution, fire bombings, car attacks, and intimidation for it. Last week he was arrested again, and his and his company's finances seized under the auspices of China's new "national security law."

Stories of his self-made riches and pro-democracy bravery dot corporate media, but unless you dig into the columns of those who'd met him, or read

Christian news sources, you might miss what actually drives and fortifies him in the face of a vast and relentless enemy. You'd miss why a serial entrepreneur who has spent his life building and creating is willing to give it all, and you'd miss the truth behind why.

"The Communists," he told Economic Strategy Institute President Clyde Berkowitz, "think they can buy and or intimidate everyone off, create their own reality, and write their own history. Effectively, they assume the role of God. They are kind of a religion or an anti-religion."

'They have initiation into the party as a kind of baptism. They have self-criticism as a kind of confession of sins, re-education as a kind of penance, and elevation to hero of the party as a kind of sainthood. And, of course, at least Chairman Mao [Zedong] has a kind of everlasting life as a photo smiling down on Tiananmen Square and as an embalmed corpse in a casket in the square.'

'But," he says, "the party and its members do not have souls. In fact, they are dead men walking, because the truth is not in them.'

“Life,” he told the Catholic Napa Institute in an October interview, “is more than just bread; life has a greater meaning.”

He’s right, and a lot of Christians understand this on its face, but what makes Lai different from a lot of us is while it’s easy to nod and to agree, it’s entirely another to act. We read Christ’s command to sell all of our possessions and follow him, and a lot of us give of our time and our money, some very generously, but how many give it all?

We know that the martyrs and saints suffered and for their courage on earth are saved.

We might hope and pray to have their courage if ever put to the test, but until we are we never truly know if we will — so many don’t. We know that suffering has a purpose, that it sharpens and tests our characters, and that it should be offered up to God, but how many of us have really tried that? It can be done, but it is very, very difficult to lift up your heart while your body and mind drag you back down to the temporal things torturing them.

“Here is my body, take it!” the Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen preached on Good Friday, 1979. “Here is my soul, my will, my energy, my strength, my poverty, my wealth — all that I have. It is yours, take it! Consecrate it! Offer it! Offer it to the Heavenly Father with yourself, in order that he, looking down on this great sacrifice, may see only you, his beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased. Transmute the poor bread of my life into your life; thrill the wine of my wasted life into your divine Spirit; unite my broken heart with your Heart; change my cross into a crucifix.”

“If you believe in the Lord,” Lai told the Napa Institute, “if you believe that all suffering has a reason, and the Lord is suffering with me, it will definitely define the person I am becoming so I am at peace with it.”

“I am what I am. I am what I believe. I cannot change it. And if I can’t change it, I have to accept my fate with praise.”

But how many actually do? How many business leaders and educational institutions bow to the Chinese communists in the name of money?

In Western universities and board rooms, Bedford points out, souls are cheap. But Lai's is not. "What separates Jimmy Lai," a friend in corporate consulting wrote Bedford "from many of this era's modern-day princes is that he deeply cares about something beyond his own money, power and status."

"This is just living my life," he told the BBC this spring, sitting in his mansion in northern Hong Kong. "But if I'm in jail I'm living my life meaningfully."

"But you must fear some things," reporter Danny Vincent asked. "For your family, for Hong Kong, for your loved ones."

"Yes," he replied, shuddering, his lip quivering and tears suddenly in his eyes. "You're right. I do have fear."

Bedford asks the reader: As with courage, sacrifice, and pain, it's easy to say we have what it will take. Going to church on Sunday or giving what amounts to a rounding error to some social justice cause is fine, but is it enough? Is it remotely enough? How many of our Western elites know in

their hearts that if they died in their sleep tonight, no one could say they gave it all for God?

So a lot of media accounts weren't wrong, they just got it half right. Jimmy Lai, a man born in poverty, who became a billionaire, who became a Christian, who became a Catholic, who became a freedom fighter, might die this time, next time, or the time after that, imprisoned and penniless. But when he is weighed and measured, he will not be found wanting. And for that, when Jimmy Lai dies he will die a very wealthy man indeed. Indeed, I think it can be said that while President Xi who rules China with an iron fist and is powerful and can do what he wills, Jimmy Lai who is in the jail cell is the man who is truly free.

I would suggest that what Mr. Lai realizes is that in a world where so many have lost their way, or been duped by lies; be it the lies of the Communists or the lies of relativism or living for the moment, there is a greater way - a way to true freedom. But it requires work. So on this Independence Day, might we find the way to true

This is something we are all called to do. But doing so requires being a modern day prophet, which won't always be easy.

In our first reading, Ezekiel is called by God. He is told to go to the Israelites, who have rebelled. It won't be an easy job. But Ezekiel does not back down from the task.

It's a timely reading for today, because we all are aware of the problems in the world. Maybe like me you've grumbled about them too. For we have problems in our families, our parishes, with people we know, at work and school and in the greater world. The challenge we are given is to be like Ezekiel and remember we are all prophets.

For one, it starts with listening to God. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. With our baptism, we are incorporated into the Church, but also sent. And notice Ezekiel doesn't go out with his own message. He's attentive; the Spirit we are told enters into Ezekiel and he is set on his feet, a posture of prayer and attention. When our conscience tells us when we see an injustice occurring like Jimmy Lai did, or when we sense something isn't

right, we start by first and foremost listening to what God is calling us to do, for our conscience when formed right is where we can hear God.

Second, we remind ourselves why we are sent - to bring back the good.

Some people look at America or the world or others and want to give up.

The truth is we are not a racist nation where everyone is racist. We are not

a place where everyone has lost their way. We are not a place where

everyone just accepts abortion or other immorality. This is not “just how

things are.” Deep down, people know right from wrong. Most have a sense

of God or certainly know about Jesus. But too many have given up on the

world. We need to be a people of hope. Some prophets go off on

missionary trips to foreign lands. But most of us are called to a new kind of

evangelization - of re-evangelizing our families, our communities, our

parishes, our workplaces. It starts by seeing the potential inside of others.

China is a powerful nation in the world and especially Asia; it would seem

Hong Kong is no match, and we can turn a blind eye to what China does to

Catholics and to Muslims, not wanting to read about the concentration

camps and unpleasant things. But deep down, people I think recognize evil

when they see it. And so in a brave act, a man decided to keep his

newspaper going and is now in jail. Perhaps we can see people not as lost

or fallen, but as all created by God with such potential that we are called to bring to the surface.

Third, we need to recognize that being a prophet isn't a right given to us by the government. Sometimes we can be fearful to go against the crowd. But our founding fathers in their wisdom realized rights come from God, not a government. It's why they took liberty so seriously. Sometimes governments do things that are unjust and laws are unjust. Mr. Lai realizes this, and is doing something about it. When we see an injustice in our world, it's important we act on it by exercising our liberties as citizens to speak freely.

Fourth, we have to ask ourselves do we really want to help make a difference by engaging someone, or do we just want to complain. As a priest, sometimes you deal with for instance anonymous complaints; I've received 2 in the collection plate in recent weeks for instance about the homily being too long, one saying hey you're a nice guy but too long I'm going elsewhere and lots of people agree with me, the other you just listen to yourself speak and be like this other priest I like. It's not the complaint that bothers me at all (I've had far worse!) it's that the letters were

unsigned. But after 6 years here, I'd hope people feel at ease talking to me. I'm happy to converse with those who criticize, and of course whether it's on preaching or some other parish issue, I might not change how the person wants me to (for I'll get all kinds of advice) but hopefully we'd hear one another out and have a better understanding. That is prophecy; wanting to engage and make someone better. Sadly this happens all over; talk to any priest, principal, teacher, public official. So why can't we converse as people these days but feel the need to hide behind anonymous online names or anonymous letters? Anonymous letters are appropriate for some very serious allegation that's criminal or a person fearing retaliation from their employer for grave misconduct. More often than not though they are just a way for someone to blow off some steam, but ultimately not help. Think if the signers of our Declaration signed it "a group of concerned colonists." Instead their signatures were all there for the king to see, and they knew they might be killed for it. Jimmy Lai may very well die in a jail cell but he is unafraid. But we have to remember, conflict is a big part of prophecy. People will sometimes hate us but if we want to help one another we can't run from it, but rather need to embrace it to truly help others. Sure, they might be angry with us. They might ignore us or gossip about us. But maybe we just might help them think and look

inside, and the good can emerge. Doing this though takes fortitude and a willingness to be disliked; even by our own family. As Jesus says, a prophet is not without honor except in his native place. Parents realize they can't always be a friend; they have to challenge, and sometimes say no. But prophecy isn't just for the parent. Sometimes a parent needs to be challenged too to think about something differently; and we all know there are all kinds of family issues that go on. It's not fun to say I'm concerned how you treat your spouse, parents or kids, I'm worried about your drinking or your temper or how you never go to Mass anymore or whatever the issue may be. Silence merely enables bad things to continue - only through engaging can true change be realized.

And lastly though it all, patience. The Civil Rights movement took years to unfold; and while things are better, we'll always have elements of racism to combat. Abortion is still legal but millions of lives have been saved because of perseverance. The Iron Curtain fell in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but not in China. I remember well watching the British flag lowered over Hong Kong on TV in 1997. I hope and pray the people there and in China will see true freedom one day, and the world will wake up. This will only happen because of true prophets and people not giving up.

As the Communists in China mark 100 years, we mark 245 years. What a remarkable land we live in; Freedom is such a wonderful thing. Sadly so many in the world aren't free, because they buy the lie. The lie of the Communist that the state is your god; the lie of the relativist that you are god; the lie of racism and bullying that is learned, or the lie that all is lost. God looked at you and me and saw what He created was good. And He became one of us to show us how much we are loved. But now he needs prophets like you and me to go out and set the world on fire. Because as Li's story illustrates, the devil and his forces are on the march and they are lying to people, but also causing people to fall asleep to the truth. So, my fellow prophets, let us do something about it. Let us awaken people to the reality of what true freedom looks like - of knowing God and following His law. We are sent. So let's never take our freedom for granted, and realize that while at times like Mr. Li will be hated by powerful forces, or even by those who we call family and friends, when we don't back down from our commission, we can win souls for Jesus, and people will know when they meet us a prophet is in their midst.