



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year B – Advent 3 – December 17, 2017: The Martyrs of Japan

How do you and I testify to the light?

How do we bear witness out there in the world to the power of Christ in our lives, what that means to us—why it’s important to us?

The other day, one of the Cathedral aunties said to me, “There are always going to be problems in the church. People will grumble. And I’m counting on you to stay focused on the Lord.”

And that’s what I try to do, even though it’s easy to get distracted away from God and focus on money woes, personnel issues, conflicts amongst church members, diocesan assessments, and the list goes on and on and on.

Then the other day I was talking with a clergy colleague and we were going on and on about housing allowances, auto allowances, diocesan politics, and how we weren’t trained to do 95% of the stuff we do – budgets, maintenance, supervising staff, and what have you. And then as if the light of God longed to shine on the darkness of our cynicism, I said to him, “Do you notice how when we get together, we never mentioned the word God or the name of Jesus?”

And I think that struck me, because I just got back from Nagasaki, Japan. After having spent two years living and working in Hiroshima in the 1990s, I always wanted to go to Nagasaki – the other city that was devastated by an atomic bomb during World War II. And, yes, I went to Nagasaki and took in the museum and the peace park and all that stuff, but what really struck me was a small memorial on Nishizaka Hill the shape of a cross that had 26 statues imbedded in bronze. It was the statue of 26 martyrs of Japan, those who refused to give up the Christian faith that came at the hands of an edict given



by the Hideyoshi Toyotomi, the absolute ruler of Japan who ruled from Osaka Castle and who was threatened by Christianity because it did not believe in the supremacy of a single human, but rather on a divine power greater than ourselves. And those who would not apostatize and give up their faith by public decree were condemned to death. This was the case with these 26 martyrs – 6 Europeans and 20 Japanese, two of whom were 12 and 13. After a 30-day March from Kyoto, they were doomed to die on crosses on that hill in Nagasaki.

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In an account of their executions, Diego Yuki writes:

They had their left ears cut off a month ago, just before leaving Kyoto. It has been a long way of the cross, renewed every morning, in the heart of winter, a month of spiritual growth. All along the way the wind in the pine trees has been suggesting the old chant of the psalm: He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing.” It is true. They have been sowing the seed of the gospel all the way from Kyoto, sowing it with their mouths, which could never be chained, with their meekness of heart when blessing their torturers, with their songs of praise to God while struggling forward through the snow. A glance is enough to show that they are neither criminals nor traders. They are only sowers.

Then of the youngest martyr, twelve years old, Yuki writes:

An endearing boy who kept singing and laughing when they cut off one of his ears, all through the long march to Nagasaki and on the cross too, he proved his mettle when he refused point-blank to be controlled into apostatizing. “We have little Louis with us – wrote father Francis Blanco on the eve of the martyrdom – and he is so full of courage and in such high spirits that it astonishes everybody.

Later on I was told that this young boy sang hymns to his mother from his cross to comfort her as she wept for him.

Talk about testifying to the light.

We all do a lot for the church. We make commitments of time. We give from our financial resources. We say our prayers. We come to worship. We reach out to others in need. But would we give up our lives? Would we give up our lives for our faith? Would we go to that length to be a light for Christ? Many people in the world today do, but would you and I do that?

The martyrs of Japan were crucified in the public square, and slowly suffocated from the weight of their own bodies which were left on the crosses to rot and decay after they succumbed.

I come back to Hawaii from Nagasaki with the fresh perspective on my life in Christ and my called to testify to the light. And I come back with a fresh perspective because of the story of the martyrs of Japan.

As the priest of the church who has been ordained for over 12 years, I haven't had the easiest time. Meaningful, yes. Easy, no. It can be tough for us as we strive to be lights of Christ—tough for me and tough for you. I'm sure you can relate.

But the other day when my clergy colleague and I were talking about what it takes to serve the church and how difficult and challenging it can be, I said this. “At least you and I have never been tied to a cross to die, only to look upon our grieving mothers and having to sing hymns to them to console them.”

And after I said that, we both fell silent for a while and then I said this: We have got to start talking about God in Jesus in our conversations. And I don't just mean in the conversation between my clergy colleague and me; I mean in all our conversations as people of faith—from this pulpit, from these pews, in our Chapter meetings, in our committee meetings, in our work places, and our social circles, in our homes, and in our hearts. You and I are called to testify to the light by embodying the message in the Gospel of love and kindness and compassion by how we live our lives and by how we treat others so that there will never be a world where people die on crosses for their faith—and, yes, it's still happens to this very day, maybe not in our midst, but definitely in our world.

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And we're called to lead by example—and that's not always easy. Sometimes it means containing our anger, restraining pen and tongue, having the courage to focus on our own shadow rather than taking inventory and pointing out the shadow of someone else.

And from those 26 crosses in Nagasaki, Japan, perhaps those martyrs as they sing out with hymns and praise to the Christ they love and the Christ for whom they waited as they took their last breaths; perhaps they inspire us to do the same—to sing out with hymns of loving acts to praise the Christ we love by honoring that Christ in the countenance on the faces of others so that we see Christ and everyone, including ourselves. And when we get to that place, the light within testifies for itself. And it is indeed a blessed Advent.

And I ask that we close this morning by saying the prayer in Lesser Feasts & Fasts in the Episcopal Church for the 26 martyrs of Japan. Let us pray:

O God our Father, source of strength to all your saints, you brought the holy martyrs of Japan through the suffering of the cross to the joys of eternal life; Grant that we, encouraged by their example, may hold fast the faith we profess, even to death itself; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Amen.