

Easter, 2024

Reflection

*The enemy that man [sic] must fight is not the people of other nations,
but the sin of our hearts and the carelessness of our minds.*

from the homily of Bishop Shirahama of Hiroshima, Japan
on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 10th, 2024

We are now in the Easter season, a season of Resurrection from darkness to light, from death to life. But Resurrection is such a mystery. How do we get a sense of it? The Spring season helps as barren plants burst with color, flowers bloom, and migrating birds re-appear in northern climes. But Resurrection is so much more than that.



Hibakusha and U.S. Pilgrims in Nagasaki

This year 11 pilgrims to Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki had a different taste of Resurrection in the lives of atomic bomb survivors known as hibakusha and fellow peace activists whose resilience, joy, energy, and hope overflowed in an abundance of warmth and welcome to a group of U.S. Americans whose country had destroyed much of their homes, their families, and their lives nearly 79 years ago.

I was one of those pilgrims, and the reception by the Japanese hibakusha and peace activists overwhelmed me. We were treated as honored guests, interviewed by multiple local media, and presented with numerous gifts reflecting our mutual desire for peace and reconciliation.

This was truly a Resurrection experience for me. To hear the heart-wrenching stories of hibakusha after hibakusha left one wondering how they could be so forgiving and so upbeat, but that they are.

One of our group stated "I came to see you for the light," to which Mr. Satoshi Tanaka, Executive Director of the Hiroshima Liaison Conference of Hibakusha Organizations, responded, "We, too, felt as if we had received a ray of light. Thanks to all of you, I woke up feeling different which was refreshing and calming in the morning breeze."

Ms. Rumi Hanagaki, who was five at the time of the bombing of Hiroshima, lost her memory from the horror of the event, but regained it 58 years later. She is now a storyteller for the Kyoto Atomic and Hydrogen Bomb Survivors' Association. She shared an encounter with a LaGuardia High School student in the U.S whose grandfather had participated in the Manhattan Project. This teenager had never heard of the devastation that the atomic bombs had caused and cried, "I don't know what to do!" Ms. Hanagaki decided then and there to work to ban nuclear weapons, saying, "Let's join the 'ban nuclear weapons' movement, involve students, and work together to promote world peace." She also noted that she had asked her own mother if she hated America for dropping the atomic bombs. Her mother replied, "I don't hate America or Americans, but I hate wars."

Time and again, this was the message we heard, along with a joint commitment to “continue to pray, plead, and protest for the abolition of nuclear weapons and the survival of humanity.”

To see the rebuilt cities, the re-constructed churches, the memorials to peace, to sit with, talk with, and commit to peacemaking with the very people who had experienced a kind of hell and to see how alive they now are was to witness perhaps the closest thing to Resurrection at this time in this place. In fact, I believe the hibakusha are our greatest example of how it is to fight “the sin of our hearts and the carelessness of our minds” and to “embark on the path of peace,” as Bishop Shirahama preached on March 10th.

Happy Easter, not just for a day, but for a season and beyond!

Prayer

One year after the bombing of Hiroshima, there was a Hiroshima City Christian Convention. Rev. Kiyoshi Tanimoto, pastor of Nagarekawa Church at the time, a church that was destroyed by the bombing, explained: “We declared peace in dedication to the deceased of the atomic bombing by gathering all Christians from the city of Hiroshima.” A product of the Convention was a declaration of peace. I offer as prayer their dedication, refraining from changing it to inclusive language.

We, the surviving Christians in Hiroshima, by commemorating many friends who died suddenly and went to be with our Heavenly Father on this day last year, now, by gathering at the ruins of our church which is turning to ashes, by standing in front of our holy God, to every Christian from our nation and the world over, declare the following:

We repent our past weakness and inability to prevent the terrible tragedy of war.

We reconfirm that God is the father, people are his children, and we are brothers and sisters to one another, and we pray with our whole soul and body for the recovery of the loyal faith until death.

We reside in this world with little clothes, food, and residence, and many sufferings, and only by loving our neighbors as ourselves with brotherly love can we overcome these difficulties. We believe this is the only way, and we seek presence with our God through our loyal actions.

We confirm that practicing our faith in Christ’s teachings is the only truthful way to save individuals, revive our hometowns, restore our nation, and bring peace to the world, and we will make an effort to spread this gospel with our words and actions.

Our Christian friends in Japan and the world over, we hope that you pray for us.



Cross made from parts of the surviving wooden structure of the church

Suggested Actions

Mr. Satoshi Tanaka expressed the desire to “commemorate March 10 as ‘Apology and Dialogue Day’ and to do something, even a small thing, every year from now on”. He added that he would “like everyone to interact with each other in the future to make an action plan to implement what we pledged in the [Joint Declaration](#).”

Visit Pax Christi USA’s web page on nuclear disarmament: <https://paxchristiusa.org/nuclear-disarmament/>. Take action in whatever way you can.

Join actions on the anniversaries of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 6th and 9th. Check in with PCNYS for updates for New York State. Check PCUSA for national actions.

Save September 26th, the UN International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, for an interfaith gathering in Dag Hammarskjold Plaza in New York City.

Save January 22nd to commemorate the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Urge the President and Congress to get the U.S. to sign and ratify this Treaty.

Read, study, and share Archbishop John Wester’s pastoral letter, “Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament,” available on line at <https://archdiosf.org/living-in-the-light-of-christs-peace>.

Be attentive to other signs of Resurrection or read more about the hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on line, from your library, or at bookstores everywhere.