

Saints and Martyrs of Asia

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James Evensong October 8th 2017

Theme Bible passages:

'Now there were devout Jews living in Jerusalem. 'How is it, they asked, 'that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians and Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia.....' What is evident from this list is that the gospel was heard as being preached by Peter and thus the message would have spread far and wide as these folk returned to their home countries after being in Jerusalem for the Jewish agricultural Festival Christians celebrate as Pentecost.

The Sermon this evening brings to a conclusion our focus on saints and martyrs of the Christian church as observed in the Anglican church lectionary. Tonight our *focus is on Asia*, the largest of the world's continents, stretching from modern day Turkey to Japan. When one thinks about it Asia was the *birthplace of Christianity*, and the scene of much of St Paul's missionary outreach especially modern-day Turkey. We know also from Gill Alcorn's testimony, there are people there yet to be evangelised.

It is impossible to include all the endeavours of the spread of the gospel, so tonight to focus on two. First to Russia, then to the 'Far East', including China, Korea and Japan. India too was a significant place for the spread of the gospel, and this was considered in a sermon theme earlier in the year. As well to consider implications for us of the impact of the gospel in these regions.

- 1) *Russia*. One of the tragedies of the history of Christianity in my estimation has been the separation of 'Western Christendom and the Eastern 'Orthodox' in the 11th century. Each has unique characteristics. This includes in the Orthodox special focus on icons as a means (or window) to worship in the Divine Presence. I remember meeting a couple of Orthodox priests visiting our country. At the time I was especially involved in children and youth ministry and asked them whether they had Sunday school like we do. No we don't they replied – children learn from what they see (in the richness of artistry of an Orthodox church and experience in the sacredness of worship, including incense. The Orthodox became the 'state religion' until the communist revolution after the first World War. It was persecuted and became an 'underground' church over many years and leaders were sentenced to the Gulag Archipelago. Thankfully many of the beautiful churches were preserved, and it is said the faith was propagated by the grandmothers sharing with children of the families. In these days there is more tolerance and freedom certainly in the Orthodox though perhaps less so with Pentecostal denominations. There are two our lectionary observes – Seraphim of Sarov lived in the 18th century and was a prophetic and spiritual monk. Sergius of Radonezh lived in the 14th century and was a 'peasant saint' and experienced visions.

- 2) (Far East) The history of the gospel in *China* dates back to the western contacts through explorers and traders like Marco Polo. Various missions were mounted over the years especially by the Catholic Jesuits. The 'success' of the missions depended on the degree of acceptance by the emperors. Once again when the Japanese invasion and then Communism took over the country from the second world war Christianity was persecuted. I recall from Billy Graham's book on Angels a remarkable story of angels protecting the owners of a Christian bookshop in China, and when the soldiers came by they saw what looked like guard protectors and left the owners unharmed. From accounts there are now millions of Chinese Christians some of whom are in the 'underground church' and some in the officially sanctioned church. There have been relationship difficulties regarding governance of the church from Rome.

The church in *Korea* has seen remarkable growth in recent years and revivalist leaders like Yongi Cho have gained worldwide recognition in church growth circles. There have also been Korean martyrs for the faith.

This is even more significant in *Japan* where Christianity has never really been accepted. The martyrs of Japan are especially well-known and the Lectionary observes them on February 5th. Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier had brought the gospel to Japan in 1549 and the Franciscans followed. In 1588 a Japanese ruler was apprehensive about western intentions of conquest and began a systematic persecution to wipe out the Christian faith. This lasted some 50 years during which many died. In 1597 26, some locals and some from overseas were killed by crucifixion and being speared as was Jesus. They sang hymns in the course of this and were subsequently recognised as the first martyrs of the Far East. The teaching of Christianity was forbidden until the 1850's. Checking on Google there are now some 3 million Japanese Christians – that sounds a lot but it is just 1 percent of the population, mostly worshipping in small church communities.

(Faith encounter)

Before concluding I'd like to focus on an issue that has vexed me over the years and the gospel coming to Asia is what highlights it.

This has been the encounter of one great monotheistic faith Christianity with other great faiths in Hinduism and Buddhism – numerically strongest in this continent. The question put is if they have their faiths then why is Christianity needed? Why missionaries today to go there? Interestingly over the years there's those from the west have been drawn to see what there is in other faiths and how it related to our own. Religious like Fr Thomas Merton became well known for his visits to India. I'm sure you, as I have read prayers, meditations and poetry expressing faith. (Indeed there's one in our Prayer Book though you might not recognise it. It's in the Midday Prayer service beginning 'O God of many names.....'). Interfaith dialogue has been a subject of 'ecumenical encounter' for the last 200 years.

Where then does our church stand in regard to encounter with other faiths? Insofar as there is a statement of definition it is to be found in the Catechism of our NZ Prayer Book: 'How does the Anglican church regard members of other faiths? Anglicans believe that all people are created in God's image and need to

find meaning and purpose beyond themselves. All living faiths witness in some way to the reality of God, but in Jesus Christ God's revelation is unique.'

And missionaries? - I regard it rather like how it is in New Zealand. It is said we are a Christian country, yet there are so many who do not practice the faith and it is our witness to bring the gospel to them. Similarly, countries like Sri Lanka are majority Buddhist yet many don't practice that and there's tribes and peoples who are not of the 'majority' faith. I was very moved when the Director of our Board of Missions visited Thailand a Buddhist country, and brought back to clergy members of the Board a stole crafted by Karen Christians who dwell in that country. When we hear Gill Alcorn speak her experience of peoples in Asia is of many who are not as yet evangelised to whom Wycliffe Bible Associates are bringing the Holy Scriptures as a way into the Christian faith. The words of Scripture continue to ring true: 'How are they to believe in one they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news?'