

Tsunami Memorial Service – Saturday 6th February 2016

Romans 8.26: ‘We do not know what we ought to pray for but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans’

‘We do not know what we ought to pray for’. Who could know what to pray for, in the days following 11th March 2011? The suffering was so great, the groaning of creation in Eastern Japan was so deep, that all words seemed futile; and yet Japanese people did pray. I found it deeply moving, amid scenes of the most utter devastation, to see people, with their heads bowed and their hands clasped together in silent prayer. Perhaps they did not know what it was that they were praying for, perhaps they did not know who it was that they were praying to, but they did know this: that they had to pray. St Paul says that all our natural prayer is marked by this sign of uncertainty: children of God as we all are, confident in God’s love as we may be, still we cannot pray clearly, except the Spirit of God prays in us.

That was then, and here we are today, five years on. We can never forget those terrible scenes, nor can we forget those who continue to suffer as a result now: those still in temporary accommodation; those experiencing the effects of irradiation; those bereaved and traumatised; communities disrupted, towns and villages deserted. And looking to the future, we ask: What is the Spirit leading us to pray for now, in all our weakness and uncertainty? Many things, three in particular.

First, we pray for wisdom. The tsunami was a terrible natural disaster, in scale and severity unpredictable, against which no manmade defences could suffice; and yet there is a wisdom of how to live as humans in a dangerous and unsettling environment. Visiting the Tohoku coast the year after the tsunami, I was struck by the number of historic buildings, shrines, temples, old farmhouses and so on, which had survived unscathed, as they were placed safely above the coastal flatlands. By contrast, newer constructions next to the sea had been swept away. Somewhere near Kamaishi, I remember standing on a hill looking out towards the

sea, by a pillar erected to commemorate the escape of the local community from an earlier tsunami in the 1930s. Engraved into the stone was a message of thanksgiving which concluded with the warning: 'Remember, do not build on low-lying land'. Standing beside that pillar, it was very poignant to look out over the debris of post-war homes flattened out on the low-lying land below. That simple message had been forgotten. It has been a constant danger for humans in every generation to forget the inherited wisdom of how we should live in our fragile environment; with all our technological advances today, that danger is probably more present now than ever before. We need to cultivate humility, a readiness to receive wisdom, to recognise that we are not the first to live on this earth, to learn from our traditions how to live as respectful guests of nature.

Second, we must pray for liberation. The wisdom of past generations could not have conceived of anything as terribly menacing as the abiding effects of irradiation, which continue to be a hazard in and around Fukushima. That is the most dramatic way in which the effects of the cataclysm of March 2011 continue to curtail and constrain the lives of communities in Eastern Japan, but there are other enslaving factors too: the lasting impact of intense trauma on survivors' lives; the ingrained grief of bereaved people who are unable to find the bodies of their loved ones so that they can honour them with funeral rights; sometimes the bitterness among neighbours where some have lost everything and others have been unscathed; the understandable sense of resentment and marginalisation among those who feel forgotten as the world's interest, and sometimes the rest of Japan's interest, has moved on long ago to other disasters (that is why it is so important that we say today to our friends in Tohoku: 'We won't forget you'). All of these factors enter into people's lives and bind them, keep them from the freedom and the fullness of life to which the children of God are called. Yet St Paul writes of the promise that 'the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into freedom and glory'. And so we pray for that liberation, for a change in the conditions that affect people's lives, and also for a change in their spirits themselves: for a readiness to let go and be set free from all that holds them back, and to enter into new way of living and thinking.

Finally, for that to become real, we pray from hope. Without hope, the human spirit cannot flourish; but hope always lies ahead of us. As St Paul says, 'hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?' Hope is always just around the corner, beckoning us on. So, *issho ni aruko*, we are called to walk together towards that hope, to accompany people as Nippon Seikokai has been doing, as so many religions and community groups have been doing: helping people to find a sense of purpose in their lives, to rediscover their confidence, to regain the skills they need for living. Most of all, and at the base of all that, helping to learn for sure that there is a God who loves them and holds them in his love. Indeed, they are not forgotten: not by God, and not by us.