

## KIRISH'TAN

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Matthew 5:13-16

Today is February 5th. It is the anniversary of an event that took place 426 years ago. On February 5th, 1597, 26 Christians were crucified on a hill outside Nagasaki, Japan.

Now, we don't normally associate Christianity with the country of Japan. In fact, today, just 1.5% of the population identifies as Christian. 79% identify as practicing Shinto beliefs, and 66% adhere to Buddhism. Yes, those numbers add up to more than 100% because many Japanese practice both Shintoism and Buddhism. It's like saying that your favorite make of car is both Ford and Chevy.

The first known Europeans to set foot in Japan were three Portuguese sailors. In 1543, they were sailing for China when a storm blew them off course and into Japan. Their cargo included firearms which greatly impressed the Japanese. The Portuguese quickly figured out the potential trading opportunities with this new land and so began sending ships there.

At the time, the Portuguese were the finest sailors in the world. But still, I cannot stress what a remarkable achievement it was to be able to sail a ship from Portugal to Japan. A ship would leave from Lisbon and sail south around Africa past the Cape of Good Hope with its treacherous water currents. They would then sail up the east side of Africa to India. Then around India and around China and north to Japan.

Within 6 years of the Portuguese landing in Japan, Christian missionaries arrived there. The first missionary to Japan was Father Francis Xavier. Xavier was Spanish by birth. In addition to his extensive missionary work across the East, he was also one of the founders of the Jesuit order. It didn't take long for the Jesuits in Japan to develop a comprehensive network of missionaries. They experienced tremendous success in converting the Japanese to the Christian faith.

While I have no doubt that the intentions of these missionaries were pure—that their desire was to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of Japan—there were other forces at work. In addition to matters of faith, there was also power and money at stake. The Portuguese were eager to develop trade with the Japanese and they were in competition with the Spanish and the Dutch. One of their strategies employed by the Portuguese when they arrived in a new place was to introduce the Christian faith. If they could convert the people to the religion of the Portuguese, that would facilitate trade. So, the Portuguese actively encouraged and supported the Jesuits in their missionary endeavors.

And it worked, because just 26 years after Father Xavier's arrival<sup>1</sup>, the Pope issued a decree that the church in Japan belonged to the Portuguese, which gave the Jesuits the exclusive right to spread the faith in Japan, and it meant that their sponsors, the Portuguese, of all Catholics in the world, had exclusive right to trade with Japan.

The Japanese, of course, we're also hoping to develop trade relations with the West. The feudal lords were especially interested in purchasing weapons. Both the imperial government and the military leaders supported the Catholic missionaries. They not only wanted trade with Europe but they also hoped that the spread of the Christian religion might also erode the power of the Buddhist monks. It is estimated that the Jesuits converted 300,000 people to Christianity.

However, by the late 1500s, the trading relationships between Japan and the West began to sour. The Japanese government was becoming suspicious of foreign influence. They feared colonialism. Christianity was viewed as a threat to their security.

And then, in 1596, there was the San Felipe incident. The San Felipe was a Spanish ship that had run aground on the island of Shinkoku. The ship's cargo, which included weapons, was seized by local authorities. And then, for reasons that are not clear, the pilot of the ship revealed to the Japanese that it was the practice of the Spanish to have missionaries infiltrate a country before an eventual military conquest. He pointed out how this had worked so well in the Americas and the Philippines.

This information only confirmed the fear of the Japanese who began to crack down on missionary activities. It didn't help that the western missionaries and governments were often in conflict among themselves as they competed for Japan's attention. Franciscans from Spain had arrived in Japan and were proselytizing in the capital. The Jesuits appealed to the government to have them stopped. The Dutch, who were Protestants, were arming the locals against the Catholics. It was not Christianity's finest hour.

The San Felipe incident set off a round of persecution against Christians and missionaries. The first of these persecutions took place in Nagasaki. 26 Christians—6 westerners and 20 Japanese—were rounded up and arrested. For several weeks, they were tortured, mutilated, and paraded through villages across Japan to discourage people from following Christianity, even to renounce their faith. On February 5th, 1597, these 26 were taken to a hill outside of Nagasaki and tied to crosses. Soldiers then impaled them with spears.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory XIII Papal Bull of 1575

These were not the only martyrs in Japan. In all, about 400 Christians were executed in one way or another. By 1630, Christianity had been eradicated in Japan and in 1639 all foreigners were expelled from the country.

I do realize that I just dumped a lot of history on you. Trust me when I say that was the abbreviated version.

No doubt, the work of the missionaries in Japan is inspiring. Can you imagine setting aside years of your life to make an impossibly dangerous journey to the other side of the world to bring the gospel to a foreign people?

But what about the martyrs—those who gave their lives in the name of their Lord? So many of them could simply have renounced their beliefs and walked away with their lives. And that is what many did. But 400 refused and through their deaths, they lived their faith for all to see. The word martyr means witness. Yes, these people witnessed their faith.

I chose our gospel reading for today from the book of Matthew. This passage is part of Jesus' great sermon that we call The Sermon on the Mount.

That sermon starts off with the Beatitudes—those statements that begin with the word *Blessed*. As I read these words of Jesus, I urge you to consider the sacrifice of the Japanese martyrs.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.*

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Then, immediately following these Beatitudes, Jesus says to the crowd, *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket. No, they put it on the lamp stand where it may give light to all in the house.* He concludes saying, *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

As I read these words *salt* and *light* and I think of those martyrs. Their actions are those of someone wholly committed to following Christ. They are called to act in a certain way—as salt, as light, as a city that should not be hidden.

The thing about salt and light is that they are not the thing. Salt and light enhance the thing. We use salt to enhance the flavors of food. Green beans are good; green beans with salt are better. French fries, collards, most anything tastes better with a pinch of salt. My favorite flavor of ice cream is not just caramel, but salted caramel. It is to die for.

But salt itself is not the thing. If salt is so good, why don't we just eat salt?

Light is the same way. Light is not the thing. Light illumines so that we might see the thing. The most beautiful arrangement of flowers is nothing without light to see it. Jesus instructs his followers to be salt, to be light. It is not about them, but how they embrace the thing. They are to be like a city on the hill—something to be seen by all.

No body lights a lamp and then puts it under a bucket. That is ridiculous. No, they set it on a table where it can bring light to everyone. The followers of Jesus are to be a light that shines.

So, what does it mean to be light? As Jesus tells the crowd, our light is the good work performed in the name of God. When we bring glory to God, we are light. The salt of the earth are those who point the world toward God; they enhance the flavor of this reality; they make it better.

For me, as a person of faith, as I hear the story of these martyrs I am also able to glimpse the presence of God. We must never forget the martyrs and saints who have paved the road of our faith with their lives.

As Christians, we are called to be salt; we are called to be light. Whether it is our daily lives or as a church, our job is to be salt and light, and through our works of compassion and love we are to let the world know that God is always with us.

As a church, we must be intentional in all our actions. We must be the light of Christ. And we are. In Lebanon, for over 50 years, this church has been the chartering organization for this Boy Scout troop. The values of scouting is to create better citizens, better me; to make the world a better place by being Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.

As a church, this past Thursday, we provided food and a warm and safe space to 13 women who had no other place to stay.

In March, two of you will travel back to Guatemala as medical missionaries. And we need to raise \$1000 to support them.

Back in October, we bagged 10,000 meals for Rise Against Hunger. Those meals, as we speak, are on their way to Africa. Ten thousand meals!

You, as individuals, do so much in the name of Christ. You are salt. You are light. And we are blessed to live in a time and a place where our light is allowed to shine for all to see. We've got to make sure that we don't pull a bushel basket over our light.

As I mentioned earlier, in the 1630s, Japan's military-led government<sup>2</sup> initiated a series of laws which imposed an isolationist foreign policy on that nation. Relations between Japan and other countries were severely limited. Nearly all foreign nationals were banned from entering the country. Japan shut the door on the world.

This isolationism remained in place for 265 years until 1853. It was then that U.S. President Millard Fillmore sent a naval expedition to the East. This expedition was led by Commodore Matthew Perry. The principal purpose of this expedition was to open relationships with Japan. It took a while, but eventually they were successful.

Once westerners were allowed in Japan, do you know what they discovered? Christians. There were about 30,000 Christians in Japan practicing in secret. They are known as the Kakure Kirishitan, or "hidden Christians." When religious freedom was re-established, they were free to come into the light. For 250 years, they had worshiped in secret sharing their faith from generation to generation.

Their practice would be unrecognizable to us today. It had adapted over the years to preserve their secrecy. For example, their statues of the Virgin Mary had been redesigned to resemble a Buddhist goddess. Their prayers were written to sound like Buddhist chants even though they still contained words in Latin, Spanish, and Portuguese. Their bibles and liturgies were passed down orally because printed books were forbidden. And they still remember those whose lives were taken so long ago.

But the light of their faith continued to shine. Yes, they were forced to hide their light under a basket. But as soon as they were able to remove that basket, they did, and their light shined so that even today we might be inspired by their faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Takugawa Shogunate