

In the Tsunami's Wake

On March 11th, the great earthquake took place. As it took place, I was at the university. My bookshelves were falling, lights were swaying wildly. Turning on a television, I saw a great tsunami about to swallow up some people.

The city's public transport at Tokyo was paralyzed, so we opened up the university campus of Rikkyo for the public. I spent the night at the university together with about 5,000 people. The following morning, it was becoming clear that we were faced with a situation that far outstripped any words. We were experiencing that lamentation that the Psalmist felt as he faced intense hardship, so that his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, not even able to pray to God.

One woman's testimony still rings in my ears. As she was making her way to high ground, running from the great tsunami, she looked back; a number of elementary school students were crying out, running desperately. But when she looked back again, the children had vanished. One boy was going among the evacuation centers with a piece of cardboard on which he had written the name of his parent and his brothers and sisters.

As we face this reality, all that is left to us is a dazed silence.

Amid the rubble of the devastated areas, there was a young boy who was gritting his teeth as he walked, holding a large container full of water in both hands. He was moving through the hopelessness of that rubble, yet moving forward with hope, the hope of life itself. With him, with all those who have been afflicted in this disaster, with each and every one of us, the resurrected Lord is walking as he did on that road to Emmaus, bringing warmth to our hearts.

I would like to introduce the testimony of Ms. Keiko Mukai who volunteered in these areas. She participated in work utilizing "Ashiyu" which is the traditional Japanese custom of soaking the foot in hot water.

"I have come to Shichigahama, Miyagi Prefecture as a volunteer. About 500 homes in this area were washed away by the tsunami and 1,200 people are still living in shelters. My job involves caring for stress by giving a foot bath to these tsunami affected residents who cannot take an ordinary bath and lending a listening ear. Listening to the stories of the residents is very important in this job. I don't ask questions or talk about myself. I cuddle close together in silence with the residents who don't want to talk, and remain quiet while holding the hands and caressing the skin of residents who can't stop crying. I spend 10 or 15 minutes with each tsunami victim.

The figure of bathing the exhausted residents and listening to their stories resembles that of Jesus bathing the feet of his disciples in the Gospel of John and furthermore, as we are now in a period of Lent, the act of bathing feet seems like the best job for me.

While working I have listened to a lot of stories. I have bathed the feet and caressed the skin of many people. One resident told me of how they were completely soaked as the tsunami advanced upon them and water rushed into their vehicle as well as the fear and loneliness as they spent the cold nights in a damaged house in a devastated area with no people in sight. They told me that the colleague accompanying them hasn't been found. One resident seemed to be relieved as soon as they received a foot bath and sobbed "I just keep crying. I can't hold back my tears." Another resident unable to even take a foot bath murmured "now I'm completely alone" and fell into silence. A child said "I'm kind of irritated suddenly". This girl wanted to work in an astronomical observatory in Sendai when she got older.

I gaze at the arms and legs of these people who have not been able to take a bath for three weeks and I am touched by their stories. Each person's skin and the palms of their hands and feet vary in shape; they are dirty, but certainly warm. Feelings of deep love and compassion begin to overflow and I am deeply moved and tears gush from my eyes. As the many victims finish their foot baths, they are ashamed when they rest their foot on my knee and have it wiped. Despite the victim's feelings of shame because they are dirty from not taking a bath, I feel very valuable. This is because I feel as though I've made a deep connection by providing the chance for the victims to share their weakness, embarrassment and painful stories with me – a person who until just ten minutes ago was another stranger.

"Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love" (John 13:1). I feel like I have come to slightly understand the deep love of Jesus, who bathed the feet of his disciples in the expression of "the full extent of his love". On the other hand, although I have experienced such deep emotion, even if I feel the love in the stories and bodies of the disaster victims, I also wonder if I am able to love others in my own daily life. My usual "self" who is unsympathetic, forgets to be kind to people the closer they are to me and is far from compassionate. My usual self continues to be constantly under question.

Within the same volunteer team there is a woman who at the age of 19 barely escaped with her life as her home was completely destroyed by the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake in 1995 and was forced to live in reconstruction housing from shelters to temporary housing. She shared with me the following: "When I lived in the shelter, the strength of volunteers was absolutely essential and I was also able to receive a lot of encouragement from them. It wasn't material goods that lifted the spirits of us victims; it was a warm human heart. On the other hand, I was thoroughly miserable to the extent that I had to accept charity and always had to

say “thank you” even for things that didn’t make me happy when I received them, which was really painful. We weren’t on the same level as the volunteers; our eyes were always lowered to them. They left saying they would come again, but none returned. The volunteers’ lives were in order, but these destroyed cities were the reality for the victims, so I think that to continue to have feelings of wanting to cuddle close together with the victims while knowing we cannot fully understand their feelings may be the best way to stay present to the grief of victims.”

Now I have finished foot bathing for the time being and am staying in Sendai City, but from the 12th, April I will head back to the devastated areas. I am praying that Jesus, who loves us supremely, holds the victims close to him and works miracles through the foot bathing volunteers.”

In the midst of this tragedy, we believe that our mission as an Anglican University is to bring up students who have such sensitivity and empathy that they are able to bathe the feet of the neighborhood.

(written by Rev. Prof. Renta Nishihara --Rikkyo (Anglican) University, Tokyo, Japan)

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