

Sunday 9 August, 2020

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on Hiroshima Peace Day 2020.

Readings: [Genesis 37.1-4, 12-38](#); [Romans 10.4-15](#); [Matthew 14.22-36](#)

'At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on 6 August 1945, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima', wrote John Hersey of the *New Yorker* a year later, 'the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto, pastor of the Hiroshima Methodist Church, prepared to unload a handcart full of things he had evacuated from town in fear of the massive B-29 raid which everyone expected Hiroshima to suffer. Almost a hundred and fifty thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and Pastor Tanimoto was among the survivors'.

The pastor had got up at five o'clock that morning. Of all the important cities of Japan, only two, Kyoto and Hiroshima, had not been visited in strength by the B-29 Superfortress; and Pastor Tanimoto, like all his neighbours and friends, was almost sick with anxiety. He'd been carrying portable things from his church, in the close-packed residential district of Nishihara, to a house in Koi, two miles from the centre of town. He had had no difficulty in moving chairs, hymnals, Bibles, altar vessels, and church records by pushcart himself, but the organ console and an upright piano required some aid.

The morning of 6 August 1945 was perfectly clear, and so warm that the day promised to be uncomfortable. A few moments after Pastor Tanimoto and the church handyman had reached the suburb of Koi, air-raid sirens went off. A tremendous flash of light cut across the sky. The pastor had the distinct recollection that it travelled from east to west. From the city towards the hills. It seemed a sheet of sun.

The pastor took four or five steps and threw himself between two big rocks on the ground. He bellied up very hard against one of them. As his face was against the stone, he did not see what happened. He felt a sudden pressure, and then splinters and pieces of board and fragments of tile fell on him. He heard no roar. Under what seemed to be a local dust cloud, the day grew darker and darker. The house-keeper Murata-san was crying over and over: 'Our Lord Jesus, have pity on us!'

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'Lord save me', the apostle Peter prayed in today's gospel reading, as he sank in the storm-tossed waves through which he was attempting to reach his master. As the gale swept around him, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, we read.

The story of Christ commanding the water and the wind, of Christ coming to the aid of his friends and disciples by walking across the raging sea, has been a powerful encouragement to Christians in danger of their lives ever since. In times of impending peril, countless Christians have made Peter's prayer their own: 'Lord save me'.

And just as the Lord reached out his hand to Peter and held him, and climbed back with him into the safety of the boat, so many Christians have found the knowledge that Christ is walking with them through the storms of life, the tragedies of their age, a profound comfort and inspiration for their own actions.

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Almost immediately after the explosion of the atomic bomb, the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto began to assist people around him. The first of many Hiroshimans whom he would help was an old lady walking along in a daze. Holding her head with her left hand, she was supporting a small boy of three or four, crying 'I'm hurt! I'm hurt!'

Pastor Tanimoto took the child on his back and led the woman down the darkened street. He took them to a school, now a temporary emergency hospital. Having left them in the care of the medical staff, he took a look through the blown-out windows. From this hilltop location he saw the complete destruction of his city and the fire-blast that now engulfed it.

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‘Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid’, Jesus said to the disciples as the storm raged around them. ‘If it *is* you, Lord’, Peter called out, ‘tell me to come to you on the water’. Tell me to come to step out into the wind and the waves. ‘Come’, Jesus said.

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Pastor Tanimoto decided not to seek shelter. Instead he determined to run to the city centre. He was one of only a handful of people making their way into the city. As he ran, he met hundreds and hundreds who were fleeing. Every one of them was hurt in some way. ‘The wounded limped past the screams, and Pastor Tanimoto ran past them’, John Hersey of the *New Yorker* reported: ‘As a Christian he was filled with compassion for those who were trapped, and as a Japanese he was overwhelmed by the shame of being unhurt’.

The pastor later told Hersey that he prayed as he ran: ‘God help them and take them out of the fire.’

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When Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, he cried out: ‘Lord save me’. Immediately, Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith’, he said, ‘why did you doubt’. And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

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Pastor Tanimoto resolved to become the answer to his own prayer, ‘God help them and take them out of the fire’, and help his fellow-Hiroshimans himself. For five days he carried water to the thirsty, helped pull injured people out of the burning rubble, and ferried people across the Ota River. He tended the dying, and prayed with them in the blast shelters at their last moments.

As the burning, sick and dying stretched out their hands in need, it was Pastor Tanimoto and hundreds others like him, who became the hands of Christ in Hiroshima, reaching out to the injured and dying. Some, like Peter, were literally being caught as they were drowning in the brackish water of the Ota river.

‘Lord save me!’, people of faith cried. ‘Save me’, people of no faith cried. And there *were* hands that reached out to the three hundred or so thousand *Hibakusha* (Chibakusha), the people who survived the world’s first nuclear bomb.

In August 1945 in Hiroshima, the hands of Christ were human hands like Pastor Tanimoto's.

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When Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped Jesus, saying: 'Truly, you are the Son of God'.

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For me, the knowledge that Christ, the Son of God, is sovereign, that he rules the storms of life, and can calm the waves of terror, is just as important as the knowledge that Jesus, the Son of Man, has himself entered and experienced all suffering, has plunged even the depth of our own deaths.

The events of 6 August 1945 were a tragedy that must never be repeated. The meting out of death and destruction on this unimaginable and disproportionate scale is something we rightly mourn, and for which we must continue to seek God's pardon and forgiveness by our earnest work for reconciliation and nuclear disarmament.

At the same time, for some Christians like Pastor Tanimoto, it was in this very tragedy, the moment at which the waves raged around him, and the storm overwhelmed him and the city in which he ministered, that he profoundly knew Christ to be the Son of God; that he felt the hand of Christ in his own as he returned into the inferno of Hiroshima, there to be as Christ to his own people.

Christ not only calls holy people or heroes. Pastor Tanimoto never expected to become a saint or hero – though his given name 'Kiyoshi' means 'pure' or 'holy'. On the morning of 6 August 1945, on the hilltops of the suburb of Koi, the pastor heard Christ's call to come and step out into the storm. On the morning of 6 August 1945, Tanimoto Kinoshi became as Christ to the people of Hiroshima.

Christ still calls each one of us to come. Come out into the storm, and come out onto the waves. Come out of the safety of our boats, to be like him and reach out our hands to those who are sinking.

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As we mourn the destruction and devastation of Hiroshima 75 years ago this week, and as we face the challenges of the pandemic that rages around us in our own city and state, it is my prayer for you and for me that we would be given the strong faith that Jesus still reaches out his hand to us and holds on to us, whenever we call, like Peter, 'Lord save me'.

I pray for you and for me that, in that strong faith, we in turn would be given the determination to hold out our own hands, to be as Christ to the communities in which we live, work and worship, in which we witness to the saving help of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Extracts from John Hersey's article 'Hiroshima' © *The New Yorker*, 31 August 1945.

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