



As we approach the end of 2020, here in Nagasaki the number of confirmed virus infections is steadily rising, though to nowhere near the extent of the big cities here or in much of the rest of the world. With great caution, we have been able to hold our Christmas worship at church on the 20th, and a very simple candlelight Christmas Eve service for a very limited number of people. By the 27th a star had appeared at the front of the church as we focused on the visit of the Magi – I found it appropriate that looking at the star leads us to the cross.

For me, this was the first time in many years that I have not had any responsibilities for directing the church choir over Christmas, because in the confined sanctuary space it wasn't advisable to sing. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, I did end up running and speaking at the Christmas worship on our main Kwassui University campus.

Back in June, our scheduled speaker for the Religious Emphasis Day was unable to travel because of infection concerns, and we asked him to come for the Christmas Worship instead. However, in November he let us know that wouldn't be able to come this time either, and as we were not sure whether we would be able to hold worship at all on campus by late December, we decided that the plans had better be entirely internal so we could cancel them at the last minute if necessary without inconveniencing anyone else. So I became the speaker, and we proceeded on the basis of minimum staff and minimum extra preparation. The Chapel Choir and the Handbell Club performed pieces they were practising for other events, two of our senior students volunteered to lead and do the readings, and the organist chose nice long pieces to balance the limited hymn singing. We ran the programme twice, with windows and doors open, and the front five rows of seats empty, but social distancing still meant that overall we could only have a quarter of the student body present. Actually, as I sat operating the PowerPoint off stage in front of an open door leading to a very draughty stairwell, I was more concerned about people catching cold than about virus infection! The first time through went extremely well, and all the participants went off to find a hot drink and try to get warm. And when we came back, there was a surprise, and hence an alternative Christmas story...



And behold, in the break between the first and second presentations of Christmas Worship, there came four horn players from the Music Department to the Chapel, saying, "Where is the programme to tell us when our performance is scheduled, for we have heard that music is required, and are come to cooperate." When the worship coordinator heard this she was troubled, and both the readers with her. And calling to her the Religious Affairs Centre staff and the organist, she enquired of them if they knew where this idea had been born. They told her, "In no place that has seen fit to tell us any more than they told you, for thus it often happens at Kwassui." Then the coordinator called the four students and enquired from them where they had heard about a performance. And as their professor had instructed them and they had come prepared, she directed them to a slot between the last reading and the dedication of the offering, and sent them to wait in a warmer place. They went on their way, and on coming later to the Chapel, they opened their repertoire, and offered their performance of The First Noel, Good King Wenceslas, and Joy to the World.

Happily, they did sound very good! And clearly there was organization at a higher level than mine, as I didn't know what would be in the handbell medley either, and we had zero duplication of carols in the whole event!

As the Christmas festivities end, and Japan expects to spend a very quiet year-end rather than experiencing the usual hectic travel with trains filled to 200% capacity as families head off to visit relatives, we are starting to think ahead, and to write the syllabi for courses for the new academic year from April. How many new students will enter remains to be seen. Kwassui has been able to have more classes on campus than online in 2020, but some universities have been entirely online, and students are not happy that the campus life they expected hasn't materialized. And again, as in the current year, it seems unlikely that we will be able to accept international students unless they are already in Japan.



This is my fourth year seminar group back at the beginning of the year, when we still thought that we could take our masks off for a photograph! Now they are busy putting the finishing touches (at best) or starting to think about the main ideas (at worst!) for their graduation theses which are due the second week in January. In one or two cases, maybe it's fortunate that the government is calling on us to stay home over the New Year, and that there isn't very much part-time work available, even though that is actually causing considerable hardship to many students who were relying on being able to work to support themselves during their studies. Job-hunting for full-time positions has been more difficult than usual this year, as a number of the areas of interest to our students aren't employing new staff at all currently, but all of these students have secured employment from April, which is very encouraging.

The virus situation here is, sadly, not encouraging at the moment, and Japan doesn't plan to start vaccinations until February, so we expect it to get worse before it gets better. However, in life in general there are also little signs of hope. Even though, unusually, we are expecting enough snow in Nagasaki in the next few days to actually lie and potentially disrupt transportation, the first signs of spring are already appearing in my garden. We look forward with hope to whatever light the new year may bring in the midst of the darkness.



With thanks for your prayers, and best wishes for the year ahead,

Sheila