

The Bencke Family in Japan



March 2021: 86 番

Language and Metaphors

The Japanese language, being derived in part from Chinese and in part from communities and tribes living on the islands before there was interaction with the mainland, is incredibly complex. In fact, even saying “Japanese language” intrinsically implies that this unique language is a fusion of the languages of Chinese, Ainu, Korean, Mongolian, and languages of places in southeastern Asia. The writing system is a combination of Chinese characters combined with Japanese characters to create a hybrid writing system to reflect the language patterns.

The language is built on centuries of external influences as well as internal shifts as different government systems have prevailed. One thing that has remained fairly constant, though, is the tendency to be intentionally indirect, even vague. Subjects are often dropped in a conversation. Instead of using names to address others, the relationship is used, such as calling someone “older sister” instead of using the name. In schools, students call older classmates *senpai* instead of using a name, whereas the older students are able to address younger students by name.

Interestingly, looking back at Jewish tradition, the name of God, “YAHWEH” had no consonants, so it was spoken with only breath, in part to signify the unworthiness of humanity to even say God’s name aloud, and in part to metaphorically represent God as “breath” or “spirit.” Jesus spoke in parables, and was even referred to in various metaphors and analogies. Lamb of God, bread of life, grain of wheat, and wonderful counselor, are just a few of these names. I have found that these names scattered throughout the Bible are very helpful when trying to describe or reference the one biblical God of creation. Japanese students seem to appreciate the indirectness and the many

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

Thank you, Lord, for the privilege of being able to serve you with the gifts you have provided. Our worship, our service, and our sacrifice seems small compared to the sacrifice you made two thousand years ago, but we ask that you receive it as a humble offering.

Lord, we beckon you to come to the side of the weary, the lost, the sick, and the persecuted. We especially life up to you our need for repentance as we each reckon with racial injustice as individuals and within the societies we live in. Lord, create in us a clean heart, and may we start by chipping away at our indifference.

Lord, we rejoice in the hope we have in the Easter resurrection. May our joy fill our homes and may it radiate to those with whom we visit or interact with on Zoom or Facetime.

variations of description to help them understand the vastness of God's character and attributes.



I've used two such metaphors in my teaching or studies. One is of a Japanese art form, and one is a metaphor from Japanese theologian Inoue. *Kintsugi* is an art form developed in Japan during a period of time when Christianity was banned in the country. A piece of pottery is broken, and instead of disposing of it, it is sealed back together using gold, resulting in a piece of pottery with very distinct scars. It's a beautiful metaphor, I think, for how our human brokenness and sinfulness is healed by the broken body of Jesus on the cross. We are no longer "useless" to God, but are transformed into a new creation, a vessel to hold the living water.

The second metaphor is that of broken glass, as depicted by a Japanese Catholic priest, Inoue Yoji. Jesus is the glass window, and has a special function which is to be the mediator between God and humankind. The window has a special function in a room, different than a chair or a desk or a picture on a wall. Unlike those things, a window can bring the light of the sun into the room. Similarly, although Jesus was human, He was different than other humans, being able to bring the gentle gaze of the Father into this world. Beautiful, yes? But it doesn't end there. If that glass isn't broken, the wind – the Holy Spirit – cannot embrace the whole world. Thus, our Savior had to be broken on the cross to bring the warmth and love of the Father into the world, and the Holy Spirit to emanate that warmth throughout the entire world.

As you gaze through your windows this Holy Week, I encourage you to remember the hope that we have in our common love for the Lord, Jesus Christ, and our creator God.