

The Canary that Forgot its Song

By Miriam Davis

Watching a Lifeline program on TV recently introduced me to a famous 童謡(どうよう) or children's song by Saijoo Yaso (西条八十) 1892-1970.

歌を忘れたカナリアは後ろの山に棄て
ましよか(throw away)
いえいえ それはかわいそう

歌を忘れたカナリアは背戸の小藪
(small bush) に埋めましよか (bury)
いえいえ それはなりませぬ

歌を忘れたカナリアは柳の鞭 (willow
whip) でぶちましよか
いえいえ それはかわいそう

歌を忘れたカナリアは象牙(ivory) の舟
に銀のかい(oar)
月夜の海に浮かべれば 忘れた歌を思
い出す

Exploring the internet led me to a number of sites where the title of the song is quoted to illustrate the view that current Japanese society has lost its way. It is, for example, used in the title of a book currently on sale called

「日本流—なぜカナリアは歌を忘れたか。」

Another site explains it is the song of the canary that gives this particular bird its unique value in relation to other birds.

容姿 (body) とともに鳴き声が美しい小鳥だから、カナリアはペットとしてかわいがられますが、もし、きれいな鳴き声が聞かれなくな

ればただの鳥。たちまちカナリアの存在価値は失われ、優雅に家の中で飼われるどころか裏山に捨てられてしまうよ、という童謡の一節です。

The moral of the song is that if the canary loses its song it is not worth its existence so it should make the most of the gift of song it has been given.

カナリアにとってきれいな鳴き声は他の小鳥にはない付加価値 (value added) なのだから、それを生かすようにしなさい、という教えを読みとることが出来ます。

The writer goes on to say that businesses are the same. They should not forget the purpose for which they were created. Companies and individuals should press on single-mindedly with the tasks they are given, however mundane they may be.

What none of the web pages told me, and the Lifeline program did, however, was that poet and hit song writer, Saijoo Yaso, was a Christian. And indeed, that his famous canary song was, in fact, inspired by his Christian faith.

One day in church Saijoo raised his eyes and noticed that one small bulb in the chandelier hanging from the ceiling was not shining like the others. He imagined the bulb feeling lonely and longing to be replaced so that it could shine again like the others. He went on to meditate on the fact that it is only the Maker that can relight the light that has gone out in people's hearts. Sin that divides us from God makes us lose our song of praise but when our relationship with God is restored through the death of Jesus on the cross, a new song of praise is born in our hearts. God makes those who have lost their song able to sing again (歌えるようにしてください) just as the canary finds its song again in the reflection of the moonlit night on the silver oar of the ivory boat.

All this is a far cry from the contemporary interpretation of the poem which seems to say simply 'gambarimasho' in your own strength.