

Sons and persimmons, maggots and mercy – some Japanese expressions

In a daytime drama called ‘五つ子ちゃん’ or ‘Quintuplets’, a father gets angry at his elementary school sons for making fun of their sister when she tries hard to speak English. He confesses to his wife later that he suddenly saw himself in his boys and was reminded of how he would try to cover up embarrassment as a child about things he couldn’t do by making fun of friends who could. He goes on to say that the kanji for ‘son’ (息子) means ‘自分の心の子’ and how true it is that we pass on to our children our own characters. As I watched the program my mind leapt to possible Christian applications of this explanation of ‘息子’: Jesus, the son of God; Romans 8:14 following (‘those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God’, you received the Spirit of sonship’, ‘our adoption as sons’); and Matthew 5:9. You will be able to think of others.

On ‘Lifeline’ in January Pastor Murakami spoke on 2 Corinthians 5. He used 3 expressions new to me but all familiar to seekers in my Bible study group. The first was a quotation from Bocaccio. 「地上における最後の征服者は蛆虫です。」(征服者 = conqueror, 蛆虫 = maggot)

The second expression was:

「桃栗三年，柿八年」

Peach and chestnut trees will produce fruit in 3 years. Kaki or persimmon takes 8 and even then the fruit is ‘渋い’ or astringent. Whatever you try - replanting in a sunny place, watering more or adding fertilizer - nothing improves the taste.

From this is derived the 3rd expression:

「渋柿，丸8年恩知らず」.

Literally translated, the ‘shibugaki’ shows no gratitude for 8 years of work trying to improve its taste. The only way it can be changed is by grafting it on to another tree. 「渋柿を切って別な木に接木する。」 In the same way, we can only become ‘a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) by being grafted into Jesus. 「イエスの傷口と私たちの傷口(罪の悔い改め)を合わせる事です。」

And finally, I wonder if you have ever thought of the nuance of the word ‘あわれみ’ or ‘mercy’ in Japanese? A question from a non-Christian made me aware recently of the negative connotation it has to the Japanese ear. My friend explained that it means ‘to pity someone in a condescending way.’ A quick glance at the

chapter on ‘あわれみ’ in Charles Corwin’s ‘Biblical Encounter with Japanese Culture’ confirmed this interpretation. Corwin translates ‘あわれみ’ as ‘compassion’ rather than ‘mercy’ and comments “It is significant that the Bible avoided much of the emotional aspect of compassion, as the Hebrew word ‘racham’ conveys, but employed a word conveying the practical aspect of compassion, ‘chesed’ which portrayed Jehovah’s acts of faithfulness to His covenant.”

Where the nuances of words are different in Japanese usage to our Christian understanding the concepts need to be explained. Perhaps ‘loving-kindness’ (慈しみふかい) is easier than ‘mercy’ to explain in the Japanese concept. The Kanji used is from the word ‘慈悲’. 「慈悲という言葉は、その人自身が、人生においてもっとも苦痛を味わい、悲しみを味わったからこそ、ほかの人に対して、思いやりややさしさを施す(give)ことができる – そんな意味があるようです。イエス様がその方そのものです。」 (Pastor Sakakibara).

