



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

17 March 2020: Choral Matins

The Third Sunday in Lent

Amos 7:10–end, 2 Corinthians 1:1–11

The Revd Canon Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology

‘The Lenten Gospel of Guilt and Repentance’

If ever you go to Tokyo, I’d recommend that you visit the Yasukuni-jinja. Lying just to the north-west of the Imperial Gardens in the centre of the city, the Yasukuni-jinja is the controversial national shrine to Japan’s war-dead. Or, to use its own words, it’s the shrine where “the glorious souls” of all those who have given their lives for “the motherland” are worshipped as “divinities”.

A hundred yards to the right of the main shrine stands a museum. Or rather, a cross between a museum and a church, because, in addition to exhibitions, it contains a “Noble Spirits’ Sentiments Zone”, where the visitor is invited to contemplate the sentiments of the glorious dead and their achievements. Contemplation is aided by rank upon rank of photographs of Japanese soldiers from the Second World War, most of whom appear to be teenagers.

But before he gets to the “Noble Spirits’ Sentiments Zone”, the visitor must pass, of course, through the entrance to the museum, and there, the first thing he encounters is a locomotive.

Now, when an historically informed Anglo-Saxon puts together Japan, Second World War, and locomotive, he immediately arrives at one thing only: the so-called ‘Burma Railway’. This is the railway that was constructed partly by Allied prisoners-of-war, who were treated as slave labour, and perished in their thousands. Over 12,000 Europeans died—about one in five—alongside perhaps 90,000 others. Those of you of a certain age will know of this from the famous film starring Alec Guinness, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Those of you of a more recent vintage might know of it from the film starring Colin Firth, *The Railway Man*.

So our Anglo-Saxon visitor beholds the locomotive with a mixture of astonishment, disbelief, rising horror, and curiosity. He approaches the locomotive, looking for an

explanatory text. He finds it. He learns that this locomotive is one of ninety that ran up and down the Burma railway, and of how it came to rest in Tokyo. He learns the name of the military unit responsible for the major achievement of building the railway through the Burmese jungle. But of the Allied prisoners, of the conditions of their labour, and of the number of their deaths he learns nothing at all.

The Burma Railway wasn't the same as Auschwitz, but it was similar in certain respects. So the experience of confronting this presentation of a locomotive in the Tokyo museum is somewhat analogous to stepping into a museum in Berlin and finding oneself faced with one of the trains that shipped Jews to Auschwitz, and then reading an explanation that omits any mention of its cargo or the nature of its destination.

If there were such a museum in Berlin, trust me, I would have found it by now. There isn't one.

If our Anglo-Saxon were to venture further into the museum at the Yasukuni-jinja, she would eventually discover the exhibition on the 1930s and the Second World War in the Far East or, as the display puts it, the 'Great East Asian War'. And here she would learn that Japan's imperial expansion was in fact a war of liberation, waged on behalf of subjugated Asian peoples, against Western colonial domination. And she'd learn that, even though Japan lost the war militarily, she won it politically, in that the example of her early victories over the French in Vietnam, the Americans at Pearl Harbor, and the British at Singapore helped to inspire anti-colonial movements worldwide and so succeeded in ridding the world of European empires.

Of the ill-treatment of the Allied prisoners or even of the 'liberated' Asian peoples, she would learn nothing. She would learn, however, that what is known outside Japan as 'the Rape of Nanjing' is known demurely in the museum as 'the Chinese incident'; and that whereas the 'Rape of Nanjing' is reckoned to have involved the indiscriminate massacre by Japanese troops of about 300,000 Chinese civilians, 'the Chinese incident' only involved the severe treatment of Chinese troops who had disguised themselves in civilian clothes.

So: no repentance and no apology. No repentance and no apology for anything at all done by Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. One explanation given me was that Japanese culture is traditionally a 'shame' culture rather than a 'guilt' one. In a 'guilt' culture, people feel responsible for wrong-doing and deserving of blame—whether or not this is visible to anyone else. By contrast, in a 'shame' culture, what matters is not what one feels inwardly, but what one presents outwardly. So in a 'shame' culture, the priority is to maintain face. For if face is lost, all is lost. All sense of self-worth.

Now, this explanation seems too simple to me. Every culture, I imagine, must have a concept of wrong-doing, which infects relationships with mistrust, and it must have some way of managing that and of bringing about a kind of restoration. Otherwise, I don't see how a society with such a culture could long survive. So I imagine that the contrast between 'guilt' and 'shame' is too starkly drawn.

Still, I think there is something to it and it does help to make sense of certain features of Japanese culture. I am told that, in Japan, it is considered impolite to ask someone a question to which they don't know the answer. Why? Because that causes them to lose face. It causes them to appear imperfect, fallible, and vulnerable in public. If that's true, then it does suggest a degree of cultural anxiety about imperfection, fallibility, and vulnerability that is strange to us. It also suggests, I infer, a view in which forgiveness is either not readily available or is regarded as insufferably humiliating.

So, what is the moral of my story about the Yasukuni-jinja? First, that the concepts of guilt, repentance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation that are the warp and woof of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, of texts such as those we heard this morning, and therefore of Christianised cultures such as our own—these concepts are not universal. They may capture universal truths, but they are not universally recognised. They are the cultural gifts to the world of a particular religious tradition, with its particular insights. They are gifts that have been impressed on western culture through centuries of Christian teaching and practice—through centuries of seasons of Lenten reflection, like the one we are now embarked upon.

That's one moral. A second is this: that, what has been won can also be lost. The views of guilt, repentance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation that are still common in the Christianised West, will become less common as the West distances itself from its Christian heritage. Indeed, we may already be seeing that, as more and more people appear to think that guilt is a kind of unjust oppression to be refused, rather than admitted. If this is so, then it will be very important for the Church to keep alive its Lenten Gospel that guilt, repentance, and confession are not insufferable, because forgiveness is readily available, everywhere standing at the door with its arms flung open.

Third and finally, this is important, because, if repentance and apology are thought to be insufferable, then face may be saved, but only by making it rigid with impenitent self-justification. Such a hard and unyielding face, injured victims cannot trust. And without trust, there can be no reconciliation.