

The novel is not about Ferreira, however, but about one of his students, Sebastian Rodrigues. With two colleagues, Rodrigues left Lisbon for Japan to carry on the underground church and also to atone for the apostasy of Ferreira which had so wounded the honor of the Church.

Rodrigues got caught. His captors tortured him. Much of the novel deals with his ordeal and his refusal to renounce his faith in Christ. For many months he held firm. All alone he prayed fervently, prayed to God for guidance; he prayed for a clear sign or direction from God. But there was only silence, as though God did not hear him, or was dead and did not exist. Then, one night, his jailer said confidently, "Tonight you will certainly apostatize." To Rodrigues this sounded like the words Jesus said to Peter: "Tonight, before the cock crows you will deny me three times."

From where he lay, Rodrigues could hear the ceaseless snoring, as of somebody sleeping in a drunken stupor. Later that night, as if to add insult to injury, the jailer returned with Ferreira, who told Rodrigues that the "snoring" was actually the moaning of Christians hanging in the pit. Then Ferreira explained his renunciation of Christ. It was not because of being suspended in the pit, he said, but because "I was put in here and heard the voices of those people for whom God did nothing. God did not do a single thing. I prayed with all my strength; but God did nothing." And now, once again, with Father Rodrigues in the same cell, God was doing nothing for those suspended in the pit.

Then the jailer told Rodrigues, "If you apostatize, they will immediately be rescued." Rodrigues asked, "But why don't they apostatize?" The interpreter laughed as he answered, "They have already apostatized many times, but as long as you don't apostatize these peasants cannot be saved." All Rodrigues needed to do was trample the *fumie*, already trampled by thousands of others, and countless lives would be saved. It was as simple as that.

The silence of God gave Endo his title – the silence of a Christ who did not respond to prayers or to torture. Still, in the end God broke that silence. Christ did speak to Father Rodrigues: not as the beautiful, haloed and serene Christ of his devotions, but the Christ of the twisted and dented *fumie*, the Christ with the face distorted by many feet, the ugly Christ, the trampled-upon and suffering Christ. And what this Christ said to Father Rodrigues shocked him: "Trample, trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross." And the novelist writes, "The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew."

I tell this story because it reminds me of Maundy Thursday. Jesus had dinner with his disciples, and after dinner he took bread and a cup. He said the bread would be his "body given for you." He said the cup would be "my blood of the covenant, poured out for many." Although the disciples did not yet understand, they would soon see how Jesus gave his body to be trampled by humanity, broken for the sins of humankind. His blood would be shed so that we might be brought back to God, returned to the covenant of Life.

Jesus died so that we might live. He gave himself as a ransom for many. He allowed his body to be broken and his blood spilt so that we might be made whole. This is what Father Rodrigues finally understood: Christ came willingly, knowing what he would endure at human hands, because he thought humanity worthy to be saved.

In the Japanese language, the symbol for the word "sacrament" is comprised of the symbols for "holiness" and "brokenness." There is an element of both holiness and brokenness in every salvific act. Jesus, who is holy, is the only one who can atone for our sins; and yet our salvation required Jesus to give his body to be broken as the atonement for our sins. Father Rodrigues broke his vow to save the lives of others; from his broken vow came a holy deed.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper evokes both the holiness and the brokenness of Jesus. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup we remember that Christ's death means life for us, his body broken and his blood shed means healing and wholeness for us. And so, we gather to celebrate the new life we have in Christ, made possible by his death on the cross for our sakes. And in a few days, on Easter morning, we will celebrate Christ's resurrection, a resurrection only possible because of his suffering and death on Good Friday.

Holiness and brokenness.

Prayer: God, we come and remember the love of Jesus, gathered at table with his friends. We come to receive from Christ the bread of life, the cup of blessing. We come, to receive the tender service Christ offers each of us, and to receive the challenge of a new commandment: "Love one another." We come to contemplate the many temptations of a world that would entice us, like Judas, to betray the trust of a suffering God. We come to travel with Jesus the way of the Cross, so that our Easter "alleluia" will take on new meaning. We come to worship together and to reflect upon the life of Christ, that we might remember what discipleship may cost, and what it may reap. We pray in the name of our holy and broken Lord. Amen.

Source: David Bosch. "The Vulnerability of Mission."

Holiness and Brokenness

Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Mark 14:17-31

One of the most moving and disturbing novels of our time is *Silence*, by the Japanese author Shusaku Endo. It's based on the seventeenth-century persecution of Christians in Japan. In 1549 Father Francis Xavier arrived in Japan to start a missionary venture that proved astonishingly successful: within thirty years a flourishing Christian community of 150,000 existed in Japan. These Christians, with their sterling qualities and deep faith, inspired in the missionaries the vision of a totally Christian country. It was Japan's "Christian Century".

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, however, opposition crept in, culminating in an edict expelling the missionaries (1614). The edict aimed to totally eradicate the Christian faith from Japanese shores. Some missionaries went underground, desperately trying to continue ministering to their Japanese converts. C. R. Boxer claims that the gruesome persecution that followed remains "unsurpassed in the long and painful history of martyrdom." Many Japanese Christians died, executed for their faith. Others chose to renounce their faith, trampling a bronze image of Christ, the *fumie*, in order to save their lives.

Foreign missionaries, too, faced arrest and torture. A popular and effective torment involved suspending the victim upside down in a pit filled with excrement until he signaled a readiness to renounce his faith. And yet, for sixteen years no missionary renounced Christ. And then the blow fell. In October 1633, Christovao Ferreira, the Portuguese Provincial and acknowledged leader of the Catholic mission in Japan, after six hours in the pit, gave the signal he would recant.