

A Letter from Japan

by Tomoyuki & Jessica Abe

January 2010



Warmest New Year greetings from cold and sunny Sagami-hara! It is always fun and encouraging to send you a “letter from Japan”. It is like walking with you through the discoveries we make here day after day. And this time, the holiday season indeed brought some new insights and openings. Hope you will enjoy, and thanks so much for reading and walking with us!

Christmas reflections

It seems to us that no time of the year reveals the absence of Christian roots in the Japanese culture as much as Christmas time. An exceptional marketing opportunity for shops, an optional celebration for the family, a regular working and school day for all – Christmas is everywhere and nowhere in Japan. Everything is decorated and yet hearts are empty. This may be why our first Christmas as church workers in Japan left both of us with a deepened sense of the privilege we have in celebrating Christmas, the privilege of having a *real* reason to celebrate. It also tells us of the basic need for Japanese people to simply hear the gospel, because so many have no idea.

So, we were very blessed to have a few opportunities to share the Christmas message this season. On December 12, we hosted a little Christmas party for our neighbors in the residence. We had in particular good contacts with two university students and a couple of our age (he’s Japanese... and she’s French!). Another lady who had attended the party came back to see us after Christmas and brought a Buddhist magazine. Knowing that Tomoyuki was preparing to be a pastor, she wanted him “to get to know other religions.” We pray that fruitful conversations would ensue!... Around Christmas, Jessica shared with the youth group a brief message about the joy of Christmas as joy of salvation. Tomoyuki also presented the Nativity story to kids, who are learning English at the language school of a Christian couple in Fuchinobe (see picture and right column).



Workers for Christ in Fuchinobe

Simon and Rita are Christians from Zambia. Their vision is to serve God in Japan through English classes and Sunday school for kids. And they have been working for many years here in Fuchinobe, in the building of Dr. Oguchi Children’s Clinic, where Tomoyuki’s parents have been already doing ministry. We are now meeting with Simon and Rita every other week to read the Bible and pray. They have offered us the use of their room for church services on Sunday afternoons. Simon and Rita’s presence, their heart for the Lord and their willingness to help us launch a church are definitely amazing answers to prayer.

Japanese New Year traditions

December 26th... Everywhere, the Christmas decorations have been replaced, overnight, by New Year decorations made of bamboo and pine branches laced with colorful ribbons.

Source: www.takayaphoto.com



The New Year holidays are one of the three longest vacations in the year. Companies generally shut down from December 29 until January 4. Nowadays more and more stores are open from January 2. Because it was traditionally a period of generalized inactivity, people used to prepare or buy *o-sechi* beforehand. *O-sechi* are basically lunch boxes of various delicacies, out of which one eats for several days. Still today, at the end of the year some restaurants will sell luxurious *o-sechi* (several hundreds of dollars apiece!).



January 1st... Like this child at Meiji Jingu, many Japanese people go to Shinto shrines to ask for success and protection during the new year. Meiji Jingu, Tokyo's largest shrine, receives several millions of visitors on January 1st, which translates into hours of waiting before accessing the sanctuary. Once the visitor has arrived, he can offer a donation, make a wish and buy a traditional decorative arrow.

Source: www.lefigaro.fr



For those who posted their greeting cards in time (before Dec 25), the cards will be distributed on New Year's Day. Even though it is up to each one to design their own cards, it is customary to represent the animal of the year (the tiger in 2010). Each greeting card features a pre-printed national lottery number. A list of the winners will be published in the newspaper at the end of January.



January 2nd...

The first shopping event of the year: the sale of *fukubukuro*, package bags of various items, usually clothes, which had remained unsold during the season. A bag may contain for instance a t-shirt, a jacket, a pair of pants and socks. It will be sold at a discounted price relative to the value of the contents. However, since there is no way to try the clothes on beforehand, and in some cases to even know what is actually inside the bag, this remains risky shopping!



From Corinth to Japan

The situation in Japan does not look very promising in terms of ministry. This point was well conceded by a pastor we heard preach this past Sunday. This pastor, however, went on to draw a parallel between the situation Christians face in Japan and the situation Paul faced in Corinth (Acts 18). In that pagan city, the situation did not look very promising either. And yet, God raised a people for Himself from among the Corinthians: co-workers and supporters for Paul in the persons of Aquila and Priscilla, and new believers like Titius Justus, Crispus and probably Sosthenes. He also kept the political authorities from interfering with Paul's ministry. And so, the preacher concluded that we serve the same God, who can raise a people for Himself even from a society that seems so estranged from Him. And we want to believe that He will do just that in Japan.



Four generations, three nationalities...
Abe family meeting in Sendai on January 6th

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10).

ある夜、主は幻によってパウロに、「恐れなくて、語り続けなさい。黙ってはいけない。私があなたがたと共にいるのだ。だれもあなたを襲って危害を加えるものはいない。この町には、私の民がたくさんいるから」と言われた。(使徒 18:9-10)

THANK YOU

We have been deeply touched by your generosity as we learned that the Global Ministry's objectives for our support in the first quarter of 2010 have been fully met. We know that any gift or any prayer you have offered is a sign of God's love in your hearts for us and the people in Japan. Know that you too are in our hearts and prayers.

Praises & Prayer Requests

- Praise God for the contacts we made at the Christmas neighborhood party. Please pray that we may be able to develop good relationships and build bridges that are strong enough to convey the truth.
- Thank God for Simon and Rita and their children.
- Please pray for the process as we keep preparing to start a new church in Fuchinobe.
- Please pray for our health and ongoing adjustment process to the culture and language.

Permanent Address: Fuchinobe 2-27-8-305, Sagamihara-shi, Kanagawa-ken 229-0006, Japan
Emails: harbowtomo@yahoo.co.jp ; jn.poirier@yahoo.fr Phone: +(81) 42-707-4286

Attention: our ZIP code is 229-0006. Sorry for the mistake in the previous newsletters.