

St Francis Xavier, Curiosity and Welcome

Judith Callaghan

The Jesuit church in Liverpool is dedicated to St Francis Xavier, the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary whose Feast is celebrated on 3 December. Parishioner Judith Callaghan recently travelled to the city of Kagoshima in south Japan, where she visited another parish of St Francis Xavier and was delighted by the reception she received from the community there. What did she learn about Xavier's legacy in Japan?

St Francis Xavier spent two years in Japan from 1549-51. I bet he was curious as he sailed into the port of Kagoshima, on the island of Kyushu in south Japan. He had been at sea for almost four months and had been planning his journey since first hearing about the 'island' of Japan two years previously. As one of the founder members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), his purpose was to extend his mission in the East by introducing Christianity to the Japanese people. In his seven years as a missionary in southern India and Indonesia, he had made fast progress and established firm bases. He was eager to extend Christianity and had heard that Japan was an interesting but isolated country with a sophisticated culture of its own.

I bet the Japanese were curious about him too, one of the first Westerners they had ever seen. Most people welcomed him so they could learn more about his part of the world and make the most of what he had to offer, especially trade possibilities. Some were far more reticent, either fearful of difference or wary of how his ideas might disrupt their way of life.

In the two years he was in southern Japan he converted many people to Christianity but because of lang-



Bishop Koriyama greets Judith Callaghan and Jane Sander on the piazza of the Cathedral of St Francis Xavier, Kagoshima.

uage difficulties the new Christians' understanding was not always quite correct. The Saint left unfinished business when he departed Japan.

Within decades of his departure, persecution of Christians in Japan was rife and those that survived followed their religion in secret, fearing for their lives. Japan then became a closed nation for over 200 years, rejecting all foreign influences. Only the Dutch were allowed to continue to trade from a tiny island in Nagasaki harbour,

from which they had no access to the mainland.

But the seed was planted. In the 1860s, after Japan had opened its doors again to outsiders, a Catholic church was built in Nagasaki, also on the island of Kyushu. Within weeks, a small group of locals introduced themselves to the priest there, Fr Petitjean, saying, 'We have the same feeling in our hearts as you do. Where is the statue of the Virgin Mary?' They told him their ancestors had followed their faith secretly over the centuries together with thousands of others, who then emerged from their hidden communities. The curiosity and welcome of the Japanese encountered by St Francis Xavier in the 16th century had born fruit.

Curiosity and welcome – the first a gift and the second a ministry. On the face of it they are simple things, but both are so important in spreading the faith community. Here is an example: recently, my friend and I planned a holiday in Kyushu. We included the city of Kagoshima for two reasons: the guide books gave it a good press; and they included references to St Francis Xavier’s Church in Kagoshima. So, as parishioners of St Francis Xavier’s Church, Liverpool, we thought it would be interesting to visit the church of the same name, especially because it was an important place in ‘our’ Saint’s mission.

We put together a greetings card and information pack before we went. About 50 Liverpool parishioners signed the card and were curious about our proposed visit to a part of the world not on the general tourist trail. When we arrived in Kagoshima, we went to the church to find out Mass times. It was a Saturday morning and there were a few people there doing jobs, a couple of whom could speak some English. They were curious about our reason for coming to their church. We were coming towards the end of our holiday and had seen no other English people, so we were a bit of a curiosity. One of the parishioners put his work to one side and gave us an enthusiastic and detailed tour of the church. We were really touched by the warmth and interest with which we were greeted. After all, they had not expected us and probably had their precious Saturdays planned carefully. We looked forward to going back the next day for Sunday Mass.

We got there early so that we could hand over the greetings pack, now confident that our preparation in Liverpool would not be wasted. On the sunny patio outside the church, we saw a desk and a smiling welcomer. He asked us to sign his visitors’ book and include the name of our parish. This was done with minimal language on both sides. We gave him the greetings card and information from Liverpool SFX. He got a bit confused and started to sign the card, until another parishioner with some English intervened! We went into Mass pleased that we had accomplished our objective.

As the only Westerners present, we were the subject of gentle curiosity, more smiles and bows. Mass was, of course, in Japanese. No problem: Mass is Mass wherever you are in the world. Except the homily!

This one, although unintelligible to us, was very entertaining. The priest was clearly amusing and the atmosphere was lovely; the feeling of community was palpable. Our neighbours made sure we had the right books, leaflets and hymn numbers. At the end, various people come to the front to make announcements. The welcome person displayed our card and our neighbour told us that we were being introduced and asked us to stand up. We got a round of applause and then an invitation to coffee after Mass. We did eventually have that coffee but not for some time. A succession of parishioners came to tell us that they had been to England or that a member of their family was studying or working there. Then we met the celebrant who turned out to be Bishop Koriyama, the church being a Cathedral. Both he and the parish priest spoke English. Our mutual curiosity and an extended photo session in the sunshine with an ever-increasing group of jolly parishioners meant that we were last in for coffee – and sweet potato biscuits, a local delicacy. Here we found more new people to talk to with questions being fired off from both sides. Interestingly, they were surprised to hear that there were many Catholics in England and that we knew quite a bit about ‘their’ Saint.

Again, we were overwhelmed by their openness to us and their willingness to give us their time. They were so ready to engage with us in a warm and constructive way; sadly, this is not always a given when visiting other churches in this country or abroad.

In the church shop, amongst the usual range of medals and spiritual books, we found a traditional Japanese Manga comic about the life of the Saint. We left via Xavier Avenue and walked through Xavier Park, filled with memorials to the Saint and his compatriots. In secular museums in both Nagasaki and Kagoshima we found prominent references to the Saint as being a key person in opening up Japan to the West. He is big news in the history of that part of the world!

Since we have been home, there have been emails between our two ‘SFX’ churches; we have set up a display of the visit in our church; the story has been published in *The Catholic Times*; and we are hoping that our two communities will keep in touch. That has happened because on both sides of the world we have the wonderful gift of curiosity and because in Kagoshima their ministry of welcome was terrific!

So, apart from a nice, glowing feeling, what other benefits could there be? On both sides the sense of the worldwide Catholic family was strengthened. In Liverpool and Kagoshima we have learned more about one another and about our Saint. And, hopefully, by capitalising on the curiosity of others, spreading the story will extend that knowledge and sentiment even further.

We have certainly experienced firsthand the power of welcome. Simple things like smiling, giving strangers time, and asking and answering questions go a long way to building understanding and getting rid of negative prejudices. Both before and after our holiday

some older people had wondered why we wanted to go to Japan, because of their memories of World War II. We have made a point of making sure those people hear our very positive reactions to the modern day Japan and its people. In these days of dwindling church attendance, constructive curiosity and the ministry of welcome are more important than ever. Our Kagoshima friends have set us a wonderful example to follow!

Judith Callaghan is a fourth generation parishioner at St Francis Xavier, Liverpool. She is a member of the group that set up The Friends of SFX, Liverpool, in 2010.