

Nagasaki, March 2020

As we all take measures to avoid infection, I am reminded of the verse “...and on coming from the market-place they never eat without first washing” (Mark 7:4, NEB), though as any Japanese child could tell you, even in normal flu season here, when you go home you wash your hands and gargle! Not a custom I have ever managed to acquire, I’m afraid – the gargling, I mean!



But in line with current policies, this is the way I go to work! We are in spring vacation, so only essential meetings are taking place at the university, but when we have them we do so wearing masks (required!), sitting at least a metre apart, and wearing our jackets because we have the windows open. Our graduation ceremony went ahead earlier in the month, but with only the graduating students and staff, no parents, no gowns, and no parties to celebrate. Japan has graduation ceremonies for everything from kindergarten up, but this time these have either been cancelled altogether or done without parents there – though the warmer weather did allow one school to have their ceremony outside this weekend, with the chairs suitably spaced, of course, to allow parents to be there. The emperor and empress refrained from attending their daughter’s graduation from high school yesterday, in solidarity with all the parents who have been unable to attend their children’s ceremonies.

Actually, there is only one officially reported case of COVID 19 in Nagasaki Prefecture, and that’s out on one of the islands, and someone who had just moved there from central Japan. Overall there are still around 16 (out of 50) prefectures with no cases, or only one or two. We are now expecting that classes may be able to restart with the new academic year in early April, though caution is likely to restrict entrance ceremonies and anything involving situations where we can’t maintain distances. So having timed my return from furlough in the UK to be able to speak at graduation worship, which was cancelled, I’m now waiting to see if I need to prepare for the opening worship for returning students, or if that will be cancelled too.

However, we are blessed in that church services can still take place (albeit in a slightly shortened form), and in many ways normal life is continuing. Food availability isn’t affected and even toilet paper and tissues have returned to the shops after panic buying which was apparently fuelled by rumours that paper was being diverted to the production of masks. Masks, however, are mostly unavailable, which is a real problem at this time of year for the many Japanese with pollen allergies. (You normally wear a mask in Japan either because you suffer from hay fever or as a courtesy to protect others from your own coughs and sneezes – not usually to protect yourself from other people.) Nagasaki, however, depends on tourism, and there are hardly any tourists, so the local economy is suffering badly.

I personally am very grateful that I was able to spend six weeks in the UK, catch up with family and friends, preach and speak to church groups, and enjoy concerts, theatre performances and eating out – and return to Japan just before international travel became really difficult. When I arrived in the UK at the end of January, people were asking if I would be able to return to Japan, but I am back, and for the moment it seems that Nagasaki is one of the safer places to be, even though we proceed with great care.

With prayers for all of you whose situation is much more difficult,

Sheila