

Sunday in Tokyo

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Late Saturday night the night clerk escorted me to my apartment in his Roppongi Hills building. Tokyo Tower sparkled an almost touchable distance beyond the heavy sliding glass door leading to my 8th floor balcony.

Travelling since 6:00am I had wondered, between airline meals, what I might do with my Sunday in Tokyo. I had come a day early for work to allow a little head space and was flying home Monday night. A couple of teachers had organised to meet for dinner Sunday night, but the rest of the day would be mine. Perhaps a chance to catch up on some work? But right now a good rest was the best plan. Breakfast was available between 9:00 and 12:00, very civilised, so I thought I could safely sleep until at least 10 o'clock.

I didn't. I was awake by 8:00am, so was one of the first to the breakfast room. I left my room at 8:50 to walk about half a block to another apartment tower and pass security to reach the small restaurant on the seventh floor. I followed a young Japanese mum and her daughter and chose a single table at the far end, nearest the long table spread with simple, nutritious choices. They sat two tables to my left.

A little later an athletic looking Japanese male, perhaps in his late 30s or early 40s, sat at the table between us. His clothing suggested he had been exercising. The book he read as he ate suggested he was Christian. I could see it was written in Japanese characters, but something about it suggested Bible. My mind wandered to my daughter's response when I answered her question two days earlier about what I might do in Tokyo for a day. "It's Sunday. You'll probably go to church," she said. I had thought about it, but had basically decided it was up to God to organise that if it were to happen. Was this man's contemplation a push in that direction?

He closed the Bible and, as he began his toast, opened another book, also all in Japanese, except for the lines and black dots. He began silently and discreetly conducting with his right hand, pointer finger touching thumb, as his eyes read across the staves. When he turned to the next hymn, Japanese mum asked, in English, if the other book was a Bible. "Yes," he replied and she asked if she could borrow it for a few minutes. Apparently she had read the Bible in both English and Chinese, but never in her native language.

Encouraged by her polite approach, I took the opportunity to interrupt his rehearsal as he turned to his third hymn. I discovered he was a church choir member, but when he tried to describe where the church was I had to apologise and exit from the conversation. I had no idea of the landmarks he was using.

Not much later I exited from the restaurant, still wondering how to spend my day, and decided to turn left and explore around the block to get back to my apartment, rather than retrace my steps.

Not fifty steps later I was looking at a modern steel cross above a sign announcing in both English and Japanese that it was the Roppongi Hills Lutheran Church. I went in to check on service times. It was still going to be up to God whether I made this decision. An older man met me at the door. He was clearly unconfident in English and opened the sanctuary door to beckon the Pastor. From the Pastor I learned that the service began at 11:00am and it was all in Japanese:

"That be all right for you?"

"Sure, I don't understand your language, but I do understand God."

I immediately hoped he would graciously ignore the unintended arrogance in that statement and I left stating that I would return in an hour.

A little before 11:00 I followed a young Japanese woman accompanied by a non-Japanese man into the entry. The older man was there and his face showed delight to see me. I sensed he was encouraging the woman to speak to me and that she felt that was culturally inappropriate. I stuck out my Aussie hand and began with:

"Well you might feel uncomfortable beginning this conversation, but I don't. G'day, my name's Doug. Williams. I'm from Australia."

That was all that was needed. She introduced me to her husband - I discovered later that he was Spanish, they had met when they were both studying in York, married and come to Japan together to take up academic positions. They invited me to worship with them.

The Pastor had been entirely accurate. The order of service, the hymns (I could roughly follow the music) and the entire presentation of the service, were a familiar structure in a totally unfamiliar language. There were two exceptions. I could tell where the Bible readings would be - a Japanese character in the pew sheet was followed by something like 6: 12-22. The second exception was

during the invitation to communion. The Pastor turned to me, looked me straight in the eye, and in broken English invited me to come forward and take a cup with the others. I felt blessed.

But there were other heart-treasures to come. I noticed during the sermon that Ai was writing all the time. At the end of the service Roberto explained that his wife had been writing for me. She had been listening in Japanese, and note-taking in English, so I would know the key points of the sermon. I was stunned. Even if I were as capable in Japanese as she clearly was in English, if a monolingual Japanese person had visited my church would I have even thought of translating the sermon into Japanese? Would any of us? Some gifts you can't touch.

I could have left then and there and felt my Sunday in Tokyo was special. But I didn't. I accepted the invitation to lunch with Ai, Roberto and other parishioners in an upstairs room. Michiko joined our table and the four of us had quite a chat. Michiko was born in Osaka, baptised in a Californian Lutheran church, brought up in Germany where she attended a Japanese school and had recently returned home and was living in Tokyo. However she didn't live anywhere near Roppongi Hills. She wanted to worship as a Lutheran and had searched the Internet for a church in Tokyo. This was the closest one, so now, each Sunday, she travels one hour each way on the underground to worship God.

So, if you are away from your own church on a Sunday, what can you expect from God if you visit another church?

More than you expect. And as some of our American brothers and sisters might say ...

Y-X ✓ to that!

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