

The Triumphs of Christianity in Japan.

We stand to-day upon the threshold of a new era. Already the vast portal of a new century has rolled back upon its hinges, disclosing to our eyes marvellous possibilities for the future, but as we turn our faces and cast a glance back upon the retreating form of the past century as it slowly and noiselessly makes its way down into the silent chambers of the past, we become conscious of this mighty fact, that whatever the past century has meant to us, whatever of pain or mystery it has left behind, it has given to us many blessings and among the invaluable legacies that have come to us is this—it has placed at the command of man all the accumulated power of the past. The tremendous power of steam and electricity, the inconceivable power of all our modern inventions, the inexhaustible forces of nature, but in addition to and far transcending all this power there is yet another greater force silent, invisible, mighty.

Some two thousand years ago a young mother laid in one of Bethlehem's mangers a little child. Resident in that tiny form was the germ of a world-shaping force, and throughout these intervening centuries Christianity, in its own mystical way, has been operative in the great heart of humanity. Slowly but surely has it transformed the world. Yet never in any century were such mighty things in foreign missions accomplished, never so many battles fought, never so many victories won, never so many seemingly insurmountable obstacles overcome, never so many lives touched and transformed, as in the century which has just slipped out upon the great ocean of the past, and on the life of no nation has the moulding and shaping force of Christianity been so clearly manifest as on the life of Japan.

The Japanese claim at least twenty-six centuries of existence for their empire, and the career of their nation can be traced quite well far back towards the beginning of the Christian era. Japan is intensely religious and her forty millions of people have to-day not one religion but several, the oldest of which is Shintoism. Another is Confucianism, the ideas of which are widely diffused; and a third is Buddhism, introduced in 552, A. D., and though it was six centuries in fighting its way to almost universal acceptance, yet it finally obtained a great hold upon the minds of the people. How prominent is the place held by these faiths in the lives of the people may be seen from the fact that there were 196,242 Shinto shrines and 108,109 Buddhist temples in the land, or a temple or a shrine to about one hundred and thirty inhabitants, and thither daily the mailed throngs made their way. These people who were earnestly longing for the truth and groping like helpless infants for the light only became more and more enthralled by the superstition of a superstitious religion as paganism wrapped about them in ever-increasing folds its mantle of darkness.

Language seems insufficient to paint a picture black enough to represent Japan. The oppression, the shame, the misery, the blackness of despair that reigned in that land was appalling, but a deliverer was nigh. Already Christianity had found its way into India. In 1549, Xavier landed in Japan and under the labors of this zealous young apostle to the Indies, conversions to the papal church were reported in great numbers, even Japanese nobles and princes being among the number.

In 1582, the Catholic converts sent an embassy to Rome bearing letters and presents to the pope in token of their allegiance to the supreme pontiff. Its return to Japan was the signal for a new conquest over the native hearts, and within two years twelve thousand more were baptized. But Christianity was not to triumph so easily. The strongholds of darkness, the citadels of sin were not to be successfully stormed so unresistingly; the great fortification of the enemies' kingdom were not to be hurled to the ground so readily; and the black banner of heathenism, which had so long waved over that land, was not to fall in the dust without first a mighty conflict. Persecution bared its red right arm and put thirty thousand Christians to death, buried them in one grave and over that spot erected this inscription, "so long as the stars shall illumine the sky, so long as the sun shall warm the earth let no Christian be so bold as to come to Japan and let all know that the King of Spain himself, or the Christian's God, or the great God of all, if he violates this command shall pay for it with his head," and for more than two centuries attempts were made to stamp out the least traces of the gospel. The name of Jesus was held in the utmost loathing and abhorrence, and Japan like her sister nations closed and barred her gates. Years passed by and the rolling clouds of darkness settled once more on the horizon of Japan. It was the darkest and yet the brightest hour in the history of this nation, darkest because human hate was doing its worst; brightest, because divine love was doing its best. God was not forgetful of Japan, but in his own way was preparing her deliverer. In 1853 United States Commodore Perry, with a fleet of seven ships of war cast anchor in the Bay of Yeddo. On the Lord's day, spreading the American flag over the captain of his vessel, he laid thereon an open Bible read the one hundredth psalm and then with his Christian crew sang that inspiring hymn

"All nations that on earth doth dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice."

That was the first Christian hymn that ever sounded in the Bay of Yeddo, and it echoed over the silent waters the sign of a peaceful conquest. Without firing a gun, or shedding a drop of blood the ports of Japan were thrown open to the commerce of the world and the evangel of God and Christianity for the second time entered Japan and there in the very hearts of the people she was to erect her throne and with her sceptre of love was to smite from off this people the shackles, which had so long enthralled them in idolatrous worship and pagan darkness, and before many years the missionary with perfect freedom and safety would travel the length and breadth of the land with the open Bible in his hand and once more the light of its divine page would flash out and light up the surrounding gloom. The conquests of the gospel for a time were slow but adapting itself to every occasion, the lowly, loving yet always aggressive spirit of the Master made its way deeper and deeper into the very hearts of the people, touching individual lives it imparted to them the perfume of the very breath of heaven. With its still small voice it restrained the young from entering upon a life of crime, with its kindly hand it tenderly lifted the fallen from the dens of vice and broths of shame and imparted to their lives, "the very sunshine of God."

The year 1872 is memorable in the annals of Japanese history when missionaries of every name united to observe the week of prayer and as a direct result nine young men were converted and with two older ones were united in Christian fellowship, thus forming the first Christian church in Japan. A few years after a company of Christian students made a solemn covenant together, as they had been blessed by God in advance of their fellow men, they would labor to enlighten the darkness of that empire by preaching the gospel even at the sacrifice of their own lives. They prayed kneeling and wrote an oath paper on which they signed their names. Sharp persecution from their relatives, followed under the effect of which some turned back, but the most of them—the oldest being under twenty years,—were immovable and the members of this "Kumamoto Band" will always rank high among the mighty moulding forces of early Japan.

Many instances of heroic suffering for the cause of Christ might be cited. One young man being condemned to death, upon the scaffold, permission being asked and given he offered the following prayer: "Heavenly Father I must now die but while in prison thou hast deeply blessed me by opening my heart, baptizing me with the gospel of Jesus, filling my heart with joy and peace through the sacrifice made on the cross, even in the hour of death thou givest me joy and peace everlasting. O father I go to thee; receive my soul I beseech thee. O father have mercy on my mother and sister. I beseech them to lead them to believe in thee and as thou hast saved me, save also these my fellow prisoners." Rising from his knees he said—"I leave an aged mother and sister, please see that they soon learn to know Jesus. In the next moment his young life went out.

Christianity not only moulded and shaped the individual life of the people, but also became influential in the legislative affairs of the nation. It erected a new standard of justice in the courts of law. It erased from the national statute book the cruel Draconian acts and with the finger of mercy, impelled by the consciousness of human worth, it has transcribed measures tempered with love. The gospel has literally leavened the whole lump of Japanese life. During the past thirteen years there has been fifteen Christian men in parliament each session and according to the universal verdict these men have been the moulders of parliamentary thought. Christianity has given to Japan a new literature, a new poetry, a new music set to the old song of redemption, but highest and best and grandest of all, the spiritual influence has led men and women to establish Christian homes where God is known and revered. From these homes the gospel has gone forth upon its mission of love. It has lifted up the fallen, healed the sick, ministered to those in prison. Its ministrations have touched every class and conditions of men and women. If the year of 1870 was a memorable one in the history of Japan, the year 1896, was a more memorable one for in that year, Mr. John R. Mott, who is perhaps the best known and loved Christian worker among young men on this continent, made his never to be forgotten tour up and down the nations of the east. On that tour he spent twelve weeks in Japan and when he bade farewell to that land, which was thought to be one of the hardest centres in the east, he left behind him twenty-eight Young Men's Christian Associations. Centres from which are to flow, such streams of Christian influence as shall permeate the entire nation.

At the beginning of the last century in the city of Osaka, six Christians were crucified. To-day in that city stands a Young Men's Christian Association of one thousand members. Truly the blood of the martyrs shall be the seed of the Christian church. No wonder that Japan in the year nineteen hundred was stirred from centre to circumference by a mighty revival which swept over the land, when twenty-five thousand confessed

Christ. What makes the complete evangelization of Japan in the near future a certainty, is the fact, that the majority of these twenty-five thousand were young men, among whom are the brightest students and keenest intellects in the Japanese universities. Young men, who in the days to come, will be potent factors in shaping the destiny of the empire. Already they have the conviction that if Japan is to be a great nation, if she is to take her place among the great nations of the world, she must be a Christian nation. Japan, in pursuance of this ideal, is the first oriental country to break through the barriers of the past and join the onward march of modern progress. Never before, in the history of this nation, was there a time when the great flood-tide of Christianity went sweeping on its way with such irresistible force, as at the present. Never before was there such an overturning of ancient institutions, such a breaking down of cast systems, such an uprooting of ancestral pride. Never before such a coming together in deadly conflict of the powers of good and evil, of the forces of light and darkness, of Christianity and pagan idolatry. So great has been this transforming power that forty millions of people have changed in everything, in one generation, intellectually, socially, politically, religiously, in government, education, in industrial life and family life, in trade and manners, in army and navy. A young man, himself a Japanese convert and a student of one of the leading universities of America said: "In Japan nothing is left as it was thirty years ago, except the natural scenery. The light of Asia is fading and waning, but while it is at its sun-set the Light of the world is rising on that grand empire." The opportunities of the church to-day are unparalleled. New doors are continually opening. The Young Men's Christian Associations of Japan are loud in their appeals for foreign help.

A force of eighty men in this branch of the work alone is needed. Then there is the vast department of Sunday School work, promising such rich returns in the future of harvested souls. There are five million children in the elementary institutions of learning needing Christian instruction. One noted Christian scholar and teacher said: "I can place to good advantage one hundred Christian teachers, in the government schools and universities of Japan, to teach the English language and give Christian instruction." It is the divine hand which has opened these doors. God has prepared the way. He has set thereon the seal of his approbation, and over all the evil of the empire, over all the disobedience of the people, over all the mistakes of the Christians, over all the tumult of the nation, over all the forces of its life and all the movements of its history, God is ruling, calm and steadfast and faithful.

The one thing that is needed is that the Christian workers shall recognize the invisible Captain of the Lord's hosts on the field of battle, and be intent to hear the clarion bugle blast with which he commands the onward march and it has already begun.

"He is sounding forth the trumpet, that shall never call retreat,
Oh be swift my soul to answer him, be jubilant my feet,
Our God is marching on."

As we look back over the Christian history of Japan and see what has been accomplished in the face of so many obstacles, when we note the present forces at work and the opening doors of service, when we Christians realize afresh that the command given by the Young Man of Galilee, in those far-off days, "Go ye" has never been repeated, but rings out clear and strong. When we hasten forth with willing hearts to fill up the openings Japan will become one of the mightiest missionary forces of the future church. Before many years we will lift our eyes to that empire and see there in place of old heathen Japan, a new Japan, a Christian nation. We see there the great Christian church of the future, a great Christian church addressing itself more and more of all first to the evangelization of its native land, and then to the paramount duty of filling Eastern Asia with Christian truth and civilization. God shall yet make of this Sun Rise Kingdom the gate of Asia, through which will flow into China, Korea and other eastern lands the life giving influence which shall solve the eastern problems. And we need to look but a little way into the future and we see the Christian forces of Japan marshalling themselves for aggressive action and the church of Christ will catch the thrill, as regiment after regiment and troop after troop marched forth upon this holy war, a war in which there shall be no rolling clouds of smoke, nor smell of carnage no clash of sabre, nor bugle blast. But the Lord himself, the very God of battle leading on his forces to conquests of love. Then India will pause in her mad career and listen to the sweetest message that ever fell upon her ear "God's remedy for sin." Russia grandly bent on carrying out her national glory, attracted by the music will lift her face towards Japan and ultimately towards the great source of light and when China with its redeemed millions swings into the Christian column, and these mighty nations of the east turn their faces toward the Christ and take up their march towards the city of God, I believe the angels will strike their harps and the earth will re-echo again and again to the strains of that grand refrain "The national anthem of heaven."

"All hail the power of Jesus' name,"

WILLARD S. THEDFORD.