

Message for Christmas 2017 and New Year 2018

Lord Jesus said:

“Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required;
and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.”

(Luke 12:48, RSVCE,
from the Gospel Reading on October 25, 2017)

These words are rushing at my heart.

Am I the one to whom much is given? God gives every one of us a mission. And he gives us all the necessary grace to carry it out as well.

I can't help wondering how I have been fulfilling the role given to me.

My resignation as the Archbishop of Tokyo has been accepted, and my new life is just beginning. Now I'm willing to be committed to what I'm especially called to do.

St. Paul tells

“that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law”

(Romans 3:28)

and that

“we are not under law but under grace”

(Romans 6:15).

These are the words I'd like to devote some time to contemplate.

Then what comes to my mind is that this year marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Reformation.

We had the commemorative events at Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki on November 23.

Luther was an Augustinian priest who was a very zealous and hard-working monk. It is said that he prayed a lot, penanced a lot, studied the Scriptures and taught them. However, no matter how hard he trained himself and worked, he couldn't blot out the thought that he is a sinner in the presence of God. He could not gain a sense of reassurance that he is completely forgiven by God.

One day he was given a lecture to teach on the Psalms, and was struck by the following verse from a psalm:

“O Lord, deliver me in thy justice”

(Psalms 31:2).

Luther read it in Vulgate (Latin) translation. To him “the justice of God” had meant His harsh attitude to judge him, and a sense of guilt had been tormenting him all the time because he knew he was hardly the kind of the

person who can please God. The psalm verse, however, inspired him to realize that “thy justice” is not for punishing us but for justifying us, that it is a grace of God who forgives and redeems us, and that it is identified with Jesus Christ. That was when he made a breakthrough.

The original Hebrew word of this “justice” is “tsedeq” and “tsedaqah,” which strongly means that God redeems and forgives, that He redeems and saves us rather than judging and punishing us humans harshly according to our own deeds. This understanding of Luther led him to a new path.

As the dialog between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church has been under way, they agreed on the basic understanding of justification, not without some differences in emphasis, and issued a joint declaration on it.

Now that we are here Japan, with a mission to proclaim Jesus Christ, in what words and how should we proclaim Him?

Let us seek together the best ways to pass on His peace and salvation to those who are struggling, suffering, and have nothing left to live for.

As we ring in the New Year, let us renew our commitment to communicate through our own words and deeds how God is willing to embrace every one of those who are worrying, suffering and burdened by search for meaning in life.

Advent 2017

Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Saitama

Archbishop Peter Takeo OKADA