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In 1968 archaeologists discovered the remains of a person named Yehohanan in northeast Jerusalem. They found from the stone box that he had been buried in that he had been crucified in the 1st century. One of the remains was a heel bone with an iron nail driven through it. There are many historical records of crucifixion including the books of the Gospel, but strangely the physical evidence of that brutal punishment has never been found anywhere in the world except for his bones that are the only trace of crucifixion until now.

Matti Friedman argues in his article in The Times of Israel as follows:

The position of the stake was evidence of a crucifixion technique that had not previously been known. . . . In the image of crucifixion made famous by Christian iconography, Jesus is pictured with both feet nailed to the front of the vertical beam of the cross. But this man’s feet had been affixed to the sides of the beam with nails hammered separately through each heel. His hands showed no sign of wounds, indicating that they had been tied, rather than nailed, to the horizontal bar.

Very interesting, isn’t it? Of course, there might be other ways of crucifixion depending on the place, time or situation. Unfortunately, we do not have any other pieces of evidence to check further. David Mevorah, a curator of the Israel Museum, said that “The surprising lack of similar physical evidence for crucifixion elsewhere may be due to beliefs that crucifixion nails had magic properties. People in the ancient world might have collected the nails as amulets.”

His account is also interesting, but it is just one of the assumptions. What’s certain is the Roman practice of execution on the cross was one of the cruellest punishments in human history, and Jesus was crucified and died on the cross in terrible pain.

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Regarding his death, we should not overlook his emotional pains as well as physical ones. He must have suffered severely from the betrayals of his loving peoples. He was sold to the Jewish authorities by Judas Iscariot, the treasurer of his group of disciples. Even Peter, who was given the keys of the kingdom of heaven by Jesus, denied his master in public three times even cursing him.

Jesus would have been even more shocked at the news of Judas’ suicide. Judas gave up the chance to be forgiven and lead a new life, which made a huge difference to Peter’s life. Peter would have also been tormented by a guilty conscience after denying his teacher, like Judas. According to the last verse of Matthew 26, after disowning Jesus, Peter went out and wept bitterly regretting what he did.

But, the bottom line is that he did not take his own life or leave his faith community. Rather, he kept his faith in Jesus as the Messiah and asked for divine forgiveness. So, he could meet the resurrected Jesus and get a chance to be forgiven and restored. The last chapter of the Gospel of John contains their last encounter on earth.

Then, Jesus asked Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” After listening to Peter’s answer, “Lord, you know that I love you,” Jesus entrusted him with a task, “Feed my sheep.” Jesus did it three times intentionally to relieve Peter’s guilty feelings. By having Peter confess his love to Jesus three times and setting him an ongoing divine task, Jesus showed him his unlimited trust and forgiveness.

At this, Peter might have remembered his question of forgiveness previously asked of Jesus. In Matthew 18:21, Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Through this saying, Jesus revealed his will to forgive us unconditionally. For he knew well our weakness and wickedness. What’s remarkable is that his forgiveness is directly connected to God’s covenant with his loving people recorded in today’s first Bible reading, Jeremiah 31:31-34.

In verses 31-32 God declared, “I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.” The essence of the new covenant appears in the latter part of verse 34 as follows: “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Have you heard about a film, ‘Silence?’ The film is the true story of Jesuit missionaries sent to Japan and Japanese Christians in the 17th century when there was a great persecution against Christianity.

Many missionaries and Japanese Christians had died of severe tortures attempting to keep their faith in God. There was a Father Ferreira in those days in Japan, and it was reported that he committed apostasy. At the news, the Portuguese church sent two young missionaries, Rodrigues and Garupe, to investigate the report.

The movie provides us with some critical faith issues worth our attention and reflection, and among them, I would like to talk about a topic through a character, Kichijiro, a Japanese fisherman. Rodrigues and Garupe happened to meet Kichijiro at Macao, and he guided the two missionaries to Japan.

Thanks to his help, the two priests were able to meet Japanese Christians in hiding from persecution. Rodrigues and Garupe heard that Kichijiro was also a Christian, but committed apostasy when all his family members were martyred: the only way that he could save his own life was by stamping on Jesus’ picture. Afterwards, the fisherman confessed his sin to Rodrigues and received a declaration of forgiveness.

Not long afterwards, the government officials invaded the village, selected four persons randomly, and asked them to step on the face of Christ and spit at a small cross. Kichijiro was one of them, and he only spat at the cross and was released. And he ran away out of the community.

As the officials narrowed down their search for the foreign Padres, they had to separate and hide themselves. On the way, Rodrigues encountered Kichijiro. He confessed again, saying, “I am so weak. Where is the place for a weak man in a world like this?” The priest reluctantly blessed him.

But, in the end, he sold Rodrigues to the authorities as Judas did to Jesus. Interestingly, however, he continually loitered around the prison where the missionary was confined. One day, he ran into the prison yard, shouted to the priest for forgiveness, was arrested and imprisoned, but denied his faith once again. Yes, he was hopeless.

To save Japanese Christians having to undergo intense tortures, Father Rodrigues finally committed apostasy in public, and then lived the rest of his

life as a normal Japanese person, forming a family. Even then, Kichijiro did not leave the fallen priest; he was the only man who kept visiting Rodrigues. Furthermore, he still confessed his sin: “I still suffer for what I did, Padre. I betrayed you. I betrayed my family. I betrayed our Lord. Please, hear my confession.”

On a periodic examination of all suspected Christians, the investigators found a religious image inside Kichijiro’s clothing and he was taken away at the end of the movie. He was a weak man like Judas Iscariot, like Peter, like all of us. But, he did not give up his faith although constantly denying his Lord for his own safety. He was weak, but did not leave Jesus. I believe whenever he had confessed his sins, he would have been forgiven unconditionally.

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Sisters and brothers,

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus said, “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” But, his saying might not be easy for us as we all are so weak.

What’s important is, however, that although we remain only a single seed, it should be no problem if keeping its power of life in us. The bottom line is we should keep the power of life in us and endure until God’s time when we would be ready to achieve our own callings like Peter and Kichijiro. Amen.