

2nd October 2023

Disasters

**“The truth is, we like to talk over our disasters, because they are ours ;
and others like to listen, because they are not theirs.”**

Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Francesca Carrara* (1834)

The Great Kantō earthquake struck the Japanese island of Honshū on 1st September 1923. In the immediate aftermath, rumours emerged that ethnic Koreans in Japan had poisoned wells or were planning to attack cities. In response, the Japanese police and bands of armed vigilantes killed ethnic Korean civilians and anyone they suspected of being Korean. Known as “The Kantō Massacre”, nearly 10,000 are thought to have died.

The earthquake itself devastated Tokyo and the surrounding Kantō region. Estimated casualties totaled about 142,800 deaths, including about 40,000 who went missing and were presumed dead. Because the earthquake struck when people were cooking meals, many were killed as a result of large fires that broke out, some fires developing into firestorms that swept across cities. The single greatest loss of life was caused by a fire that engulfed an Army Clothing Depot in downtown Tokyo, where about 38,000 people died after taking shelter from the earthquake.

The damage from this natural disaster was one of the greatest sustained by Japan. In 1960, on the 37th anniversary of the quake, the government declared 1st September as annual “Disaster Prevention Day”.

As the result of devastating natural disasters, lessons can be learned, and a “Disaster Prevention Day” can remind a people and their nation that preventative measures can be put in place: firebreaks to slow the spread of forest fires; flood defences to mitigate against rising water levels; buildings constructed that are better able to withstand earthquakes; first-responders better prepared for action. But what of human disasters? What of the slaughter of upwards of 10,000 Koreans on the strength of a rumour? What about ethnic cleansing throughout the world?

When we *create* disasters – from environmental destruction to the pain and suffering inflicted on humanity, in our personal, national and international responsibilities, shouldn’t every day not be a prayerful and thoughtful “disaster prevention day” for us all, and not only in Japan?

A prayer for today

*Lord, in my learning about myself, I’m trying to stop doing wrong again.
In my learning about you, help me steer clear of avoidable disasters. Amen*