

A Man with a Mustard Seed

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On February 16 we read in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus told His disciples: "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you"(17: 6).

Most of us, reading this passage, see it as a striking image. Perhaps when we were church school students we were given mustard seeds as an encouraging reminder that even a little faith can eventually achieve wonderful things.

But how many of us really believe that our faith could bring about big changes, especially against great odds? Do we have faith at least as substantial as a mustard seed?

On this day we remember a man who did have that faith: Saint Nicholas (or Nicolai) of Japan, who worked to foster Orthodox Christianity in that country. He was born Ivan Kasatkin in 1836 in Smolensk, Russia. A bright student, he won a scholarship to the St. Petersburg Theological Academy and began his studies there in 1856.

Four years later, an announcement was posted on the Academy's notice board: Graduates were invited to apply for the position of chief priest at the Russian Embassy Church in Japan. Ivan Kasatkin, reading the announcement, felt deeply drawn to the idea of going to Japan. He hurried to complete his application, and was soon given the good news that he had won the position. In June of that year, 1860, he was tonsured a monk and given the name Nicholas. He spent the following winter making the long voyage to his new country.

Nicholas knew what he would face when he arrived. He was a missionary in a land where Christianity was prohibited. There was widespread persecution of its adherents; Japanese called it a "vicious" religion. The Bible and numerous other needed books had not yet been translated.

He began slowly, spending years talking to people in the streets, in order to absorb Japanese culture and language and show that he respected both. His first convert, a samurai and son of a Shinto priest, helped him bring others to the faith, but he was not looking for large numbers. Having seen the Japanese people's high regard for the written word, he sought out Christian spiritual works to translate, while continuing to meet and talk with people.

Over time the number of converts to the Orthodox faith in Japan grew and Fr. Nicholas was eventually consecrated Bishop of Tokyo. Parishes and schools were established, and a number of Japanese men were educated and ordained as clergy for the Mission.

The Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) was a time of danger and uncertainty for Nicholas, as the most visible Russian in Japan. But he declined special protection, and quietly went on with his work of translation and visits to his parishes, by then numbering over 200. He would live for another 11 years, carrying on with his work energetically despite illness and the many demands placed on him.

When we wonder how much our faith can really do, Nicholas' life is a good example. We may never have as much faith as he had, but even a mustard seed grain's worth can grow into something beautiful to glorify God.

