

For Whom A Bell Tolls

A Story Of A Bell, Past And Present

Recently at Trinity Church a random question was posed, “Do you know where Trinity’s bell is?” The response ranged from “What bell?”, “We don’t have a bell.”, and even a response in cool current vernacular “Bell..duh!”. Yet one individual without hesitation offered, “The bell is where it has always been.”

So, does Trinity have a bell or not?

The construction of Trinity Church took place between 1910 and 1917; The Sigmond Memorial Education building was added in 1950. The church structure was designed as a “two story Neo-Gothic style brick rectory with limestone trim by the New York architectural firm of Foster, Gade, & Graham and is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places in the Sunset Park Historic District.”

Trinity is Neo-Gothic, fortress like, complete with a tower structure at the corner of 4th Avenue and 46th Street. Yet no chiming bell has ever tolled the daily hours from there or bid a welcome to worship from this “mighty fortress”, but a bell does indeed hang within.

Trinity has a bell and its story is worthy of being told in this 21st century, for Trinity’s bell is over 480 years old. It is older than the “Liberty Bell” hanging in Independence Hall in Philadelphia and even older than the pilgrim landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620. The story of the bell is one involving missionaries, hunger and famine and the goodness of Trinity’s women.

From the early days of Trinity’s history, missionaries have gone forth to various areas of the world spreading the good word and bringing souls to Christ. In 1914, Dr. Nathanael Fedde and his wife, Helen, became Trinity’s first missionaries to Honan Province in China. In 1920, a countrywide famine was in effect throughout China causing widespread hunger and destitution among the population. The mission was besieged by countless souls in need of food and comfort. Money for medicine, food and clothing was urgently needed.

During the Christmas season of 1920, the cry for help from the Honan Mission was heard and received by the women of the “Azalea Society”. This society was a church ladies group formed in 1892 to serve the needs of Trinity’s missions both at home and abroad. An azalea is like a rhododendron capable of growing in dry soil, thus a title appropriate for serving missions in difficult straits. The ladies of the Azalea Society responded immediately by undertaking a special collection which they named a “Christmas gift for Jesus”. Their effort was outstanding, as seven hundred dollars was contributed that evening. Eventually, fourteen hundred dollars was gathered (an extraordinary sum for 1920) and forwarded to the mission in China. With these funds a soup kitchen (nicknamed Camp Trinity) was established and many souls were fed and saved from starvation. In appreciation, Trinity was subsequently to receive what turned out to be a Chinese Buddhist temple bell dating from the year 1522.

The story of the bell has been well kept and preserved in Trinity’s archival records since the nineteen twenties. Here, then is the story of Trinity’s bell as excerpted from the records.

The Story Of Trinity's Bell



1. From Dr. N. Fedde's report written retrospectively while on furlough to the U.S.

"Late one intensely cold evening in the first or second week of December 1920 we heard a commotion at the gate of the hospital grounds. On investigation we saw a cluster of Chinese women who had wrapped their quilted clothing around the combined mass of themselves and infants to give the infants the benefit of mother's warm bosom. These and many more were famine refugees trekking towards the warm climate further south. They had stopped at the hospital to beg for food.

General Feng Yu Hsiang's troops were in the vicinity (*Gen. Feng, (1880-1948) a former warlord, converted to Christianity by Methodist missionaries in 1912*)*. With the General's consent Colonel Yang Tse Chiang was delegated to see that order was maintained. In fact in the first night that the sheds were opened for the refugees as sleeping quarters, they stormed in, and men, women, and children were mixed in such a manner that a strong power had to unscramble them. The Colonel (*took charge*) and personally sorted them so a scandal was averted. He also sent sentries who stood one on each side of the soup and bread line so there was peace and harmony.

Those with Typhus, infectious diseases or other infirmities were hospitalized. The camp was hard hit as many of the refugees brought the pestilence with them.

* The Columbia Encyclopedia, Third Edition 1963, Columbia University Press

At the time of our heaviest load our hospital which was designed for 97 beds had instead 190. We bedded the overflow in straw over shutters, also in straw on the ward floors, still others on sheets of corrugated galvanized roofing iron, still others on planks from the carpenter shop. Finally we had to make use of the morgue to shelter a few more. Last of all some were bedded on the ground with a few bricks to keep the straw from slipping away.

The last days of March we took stock and found that we could still keep going for two weeks. Then the Lord again provided with a gift of about \$700, which not only fed them but helped them home to their empty farms.

A month or so earlier, Dr. Behrentz (*at the mission*), recognizing the signs of a growing famine, had written an article in our synod's paper predicting a severe famine in the area between the Yellow River and the Yangtze.

It happened that the church paper, *Lutheranen*, (The Lutheran) containing Dr. Behrentz's article arrived early in December. A few days later members of the Azalea Society were assembled in the home of Dr. B.A. Fedde. Mrs. Fedde read the article to her guests.

(*The news of the famine*)...was a challenge to practice Christianity in action. On a motion the whole of the Azalea's treasury was given as a beginning of a relief fund dedicated as a birthday present to the Savior. Enthusiasm ran high and additional funds poured in so that in a very few days \$700 was cabled.

During the last few weeks I (*Dr. Fedde*) noticed one of the doors of the temple we had used at the camp was barricaded with a bell. After a close examination I saw it was damaged but when stripped of its mud it could be used. After we reached home on our first furlough I wrote to Mr. Holman (*at the mission*) asking him to buy that piece of junk and ship it to me. This entailed some difficulties but we finally got it. Part of the inscription is a list of names of all the Chinese who had contributed the money to have the bell cast. The rest of the legend states that it was cast for the temple of the God of Fire, and the rest is the date which would correspond to within a few decades of the date of Columbus' discovery of America."

2. Nordiske Tidene (*Norway Times ca. 1923 translated*)

A Bell Dedication A Unique Service Took Place At Trinity Church

A rare, beautiful and unique celebration occurred Sunday evening at Trinity Church, 4th Avenue and 46th Street in Brooklyn. A Chinese temple bell which for over 400 years had rung for Buddhist gods, was dedicated for Christian use in front of a large gathering. The Chinese bell makers, who as non-Christians, forged the bell a long time ago, never dreamed that this 400 years later would end up in so different a setting from its origin. It will hereafter be used at Trinity Church to promote interest in mission work in China, where this congregation supports Dr. Fedde, as a missionary. The bell arrived awhile ago through a relative of Dr. Fedde's. His brother, Dr. Bernhard Fedde donation covered the cost of shipping it from China to Brooklyn.

The homily at the dedication was given by Dr. C.M. Roan from Minneapolis, who based his homily on Paul's letter from prison to the Romans aimed at the youth. The consecration of the bell itself, which was standing at the altar was carried out by Pastor J.C. Herre. The bell was struck 3 times in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Other pastors also participated in the solemn ceremony; Pastors Charles Crouch, Prof. H.O. Gronlid, C.O. Pedersen and missionary in China, Pastor Egeland.

At the suggestion of the church's pastor, S.O. Sigmond, everyone agreed to send greetings to Trinity's missionaries, Nathanael Fedde and his wife, Martha Kulberg, Tromborg and M. A. Pedersen and the deaconesses, Birgitte and Olette, all of whom work on mission fields.

The bell is similar in form to an ordinary church bell, but much longer. It hung a short while ago in a Chinese temple until the Christian General Feng of Honan Province delivered it to Dr. Fedde so that it would begin helping the needy on the mission station. It is of interest that Trinity congregation in Brooklyn sent \$1400 to provide for them. The food distribution

to many people took place in the courtyard, which was nicknamed “Camp Trinity” by Dr. Fedde.

The names of the four men who cast the bell are inscribed on the bell. One of the other inscriptions is a prayer to provide good winds, plenty of rain, peace in the land and a safe population.

3. Newspaper article (*unnamed ca. 1923*)

Chinese Bell 400 Years old for Brooklyn Church

The unveiling and dedication of a Chinese bell which is 400 years old, or more than twice as old as the Liberty Bell took place last night in the Norwegian Lutheran Trinity Church, 4th. Ave and 46th. St., of which the Rev. S.O. Sigmond is pastor and the Rev. A. Crouch and H.A. Gronlid, associate pastors. The bell is a gift of General Feng of Honan, China, a Christian man, to Nathaniel Fedde, missionary of Trinity Church. The freight was paid by Dr. B. A. Fedde. To the people of the district of Honan \$400 was sent a year or two ago to relieve the famine. The gift of the bell is in appreciation of this gift, clothes and food being distributed in a heathen temple, where it had been rung for 250 years before the Liberty Bell sounded out its call. The bell will be placed in the museum of Trinity Church.”

4. Newspaper article (*unnamed ca. 1923*)

Trinity Church Gets Chinese Bell 400 Years Old Formerly used to Call Heathens in the Orient to Public Worship Dedicated Last Sunday Was given to Bay Ridge Congregation As a Testimonial to the Missionary Work of Its Members

Dedication of a Chinese bell more than 400 years old at the Trinity Norwegian Lutheran Church Fourth avenue and Forty-sixth street of which the Rev. S.O.Sigmond is pastor was the crowning feature last Sunday, to an incident that makes this Bay Ridge church the possessor of an article so rich in historic associations. The dedicatory services were conducted by the Rev. J. C. Herre, associate pastor, while its first toll by a member was registered by Bernhardt Gernstein.

The bell stands as a testimonial to the missionary work accomplished by members of the church in far away China.

Through the efforts of Dr. Nathanael Fedde, a member of the church, and General Feng, a Chinaman converted to Christianity, the bell was transported from its home in the Orient where it had done duty for four centuries, to Trinity Church Bay Ridge.

General Feng is the military governor of the province of Honan, where the local missionaries to China are at work, and is called the Christian General of China. He is a sincere and really warm Christian, who has aided the missionaries at all times, giving them a heathen temple for the use of distributing clothes and food to the starving people of his country. It is from this temple that the bell was taken and turned over to Dr. Fedde as a testimonial of his Christian work in the Orient.

The people of Honan it seems, had suffered from drought which caused the price of food to rise. General Feng Yu-Shiang, the Christian Tuchun, sent out an invitation to the churches requesting cooperation in his appeal to God for deliverance. One day he invited more than 800 Christians with his troops to hold a prayer meeting. After a grand review more than 10,000 men sang “Onward Christian Soldiers,” which is a favorite hymn of General Feng’s soldiers. After a short sermon by Rev. Pu Li Teh, a number of the soldiers joined in prayer for rain.

Closing up the meeting, General Feng Yu-Shiang, Elijah-like, stepped forward to the platform and offered the following supplication;

“ Oh God, just and benelovent , Thou punisheth sin and wickedness with natural calamities.

We do not come to utter our complaints, but we humbly implore Thy mercy. Oh! Have mercy upon me, Feng Yu-Shiang, a miserable sinner.

Punish me alone, and spare all the people in the province. Punish me for the sins and crimes of all the people of Honan, but spare them, O Lord! Cut me to pieces and scatter my ashes to the wind. I am willing to go down to hell for the sins of my wickedness of my people, and indeed I will praise Thy justice even in hell.”

His clear and thundering voice was heard by all the people present who could not help shed their tears. Exactly two hours after the prayer meeting , there was a great rain, which was indeed a shower of blessing that the people desired.

This Chinese bell that has been added to the church museum is more than twice as old as the famous “Liberty Bell” in Independence Hall in Philadelphia. It was calling the people of China to worship shortly after Columbus set foot on this continent. Like the “Liberty Bell” it is a victim of the ravages of time, as two of its scallops are broken. It was cast by inventive men of China in the month of June 1522. The names of the four men who made it are still to be read and several inscriptions and floral designs on the bell are also discernible. One of the inscriptions is a prayer asking for “genial wind, nice rain, peaceful country and population safe”.

The bell is about two feet high and weighs 206 pounds. It is made of heavy iron. It has very little intrinsic value but it is prized for three reasons; its historic value, its missionary value, pointing to the dedication of *non-christians in the world*, and its value in the missionary museum of the church, which is largely made up of material sent by Dr. Fedde and Missionary Martha Kulberg.”

Does Trinity Have A Bell?

The question “Does Trinity Have A Bell?” no longer begs an answer. Trinity indeed has a bell and it hangs where it has always hung in the lower portion of the stairwell on the 4th Avenue and 46th Street corner of the church since 1922. It had traditionally been rung each New Year’s Eve until the 1960’s at midnight services. In addition, it was rung by departing teenage hi-leaguers exiting from the New Years Eve midnight service in the 1950’s, when a mass of leaguers enthusiastically whacked and smacked the old bell by any means handy before spilling out onto the frigid climes of 4th Avenue, excitedly yelling “Happy New Year” to everyone along the avenue.

Today in 2005, 483 years later, the toll of the bell is silent-or is it? Pass by the bell one day and give it a mighty strike. Put your ear close to the bell and listen. You will truly hear the legacy of Trinity’s missionaries from past days, bidding to one and all.

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Trinity's Missionaries

China Dr. Nathanael and Hellen Fedde
 Rev. Herbert and Edna Loddigs.
 Sister Birgitha Nilssen
 Martha Kulberg

Japan Dr. Olaf and Eleanor Hansen
Sudan Sister Olette Berentsen
 Ruth Christiansen
 Sister Anna Olsen

Tanganyika Elizabeth Arnesen
 Martha Pedersen

India Dr. William and Jeanne Scott

Cameroon, Liberia, India, Costa Rica, Colombia
 Dr. Irving and Alma Olsen

Ethiopia Dr. Martha Maakestad

Erik Sorensen 2005

Suggested Reading

The Story Of My Life
Martha Kulberg, Brooklyn, N.Y. 1930

Peng Fu From Junan
Andrew Burgess, Augsburg Publishing 1939

The Chiangs Of China
Elmer T. Clark, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press 1943

Journey To Chungking
Daniel Nelson, Ph.D., Augsburg Publishing 1945

For The Heart Of Africa
Ruth Christiansen, Augsburg Publishing 1956

Contact Erik Sorensen if you wish to borrow any of these topical books.

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