

Dear friends,

The day before we left India we travelled to St. Thomas Mount and the church and museum and Reliquary. This was where St. Thomas was martyred in AD63 (If I remember correctly). He was speared in the back while praying before a stone cross he had chiselled out of stone. He was killed by enemies he had made whilst in Kerala who followed him to Chennai. It is now a “National shrine of India” and in the church there is a painting purportedly by St. Luke that he had carried to India. Whatever one thinks about such claims they undoubtedly strengthen the faithful as does the chapel that details how every apostle died and a separate reliquary that details scores and scores of saints and the special intention that they all represent (patron saint of such and such). I was glad that they had St. Martin of Tours. Martin is not such an uncommon name here. The Mount has excellent views over Chennai. We could have used the steps made by the Portuguese to get there but Sam (God bless him) took us to the top by car.

After extreme anxiety caused by Air India changing our flight from 11.20 to 5.50 am, we managed to cancel and re-book with Sri Lanka airways and at about 9.40 we took off on the short flight to Colombo where we were picked up and driven to our Airbnb in Kandy. It was very hard to find but it is very comfortable, overlooking a lush tropical valley and our host Kanil is very helpful – a godsend because here in Sri Lanka we are flying solo, without any contacts at all.

On Saturday. After waking to two monkeys on our Veranda looking in on us (which gave me palpitations thinking back to Langkawi in Malaysia), we visited the “Temple of the tooth” the most important Buddhist shrine in the country because it holds the Holy relic of the Buddha’s tooth. There is a lot of devotion here for any Holy Relic (See previous comment about St. Thomas Mount) and sumptuous carvings of the Buddha in lots of different poses. I’ve spoken before about how Buddhism is (in my view) a host of internal contradictions and perhaps when we know him a bit better, I’ll ask Kanil about his take on his faith. He has already said that he is a Buddhist although he was educated at an Anglican school which would explain his excellent English. As far as I can tell, pure Buddhism is against all attachments , because they are the cause of all suffering, so is intrinsically against all attachments such as family or spouse or culture or friends or family yet they all seem very family oriented. Also, I believe that Buddha said not to worship him but that is exactly what it looks like to me. Also, there are many thousands of Buddhas, one for every age and universe (according to my reading) and many heavens and hells and divinities and demons and “hungry ghosts”. Still, I’ve read all I want to read and now I will just absorb this culture. Another contradiction is that everyone seems very friendly and open but just recently they just ended a brutal civil war against the Hindu Tamils in the north of the country where claims of genocide and brutal oppression were rife.

This is the first time we have travelled everywhere by Tuk Tuk, because the city’s roads are very narrow and crowded. At first this was a pretty hair-raising experience, but you get used to it. In fact on Sunday morning this was the first time I’d ever gone to church by Tuk Tuk, this time to St. Paul’s Anglican church which is near the Buddhist Temple. What can I say – it was very “Anglican” for good or ill. We got there and sat a couple of rows from the front and

we sat in glorious isolation while about one hundred people jostled for prime position on the back pews. It was a curious mixture of BCP and more modern fare and took an hour and a half. There were five hymns from ancient and Modern and the preacher was a Catholic priest (for some reason I haven't yet fathomed) which was good because his English was far better than the vicar's was. At tea after the service no-one spoke to us, so as I say, very Anglican indeed! In fact, before we went there, I had sent two emails to the church to say we were coming and would like to get a little involved which went unanswered and ignored (Good that I've got that off my chest now!). It is hot and sultry as I write and we've just had a tropical downpour – when it rains it RAINS here. At five thirty every morning we hear the chanting of Buddhist monks at a nearby Stupa (a dome usually holding a holy relic) on the other side of the valley to our airbnb. What is it about monks of every religion that insists on starting so early?

Sri Lanka has been world renowned for Gems for Millenia. In fact, it is reputed that the Queen of Sheba gave king Solomon a ruby from Sri Lanka a thousand years before Christ. Well, next Saturday it is Louise and I's 11th wedding anniversary, so I've emptied my bank account to buy ruby earrings and a necklace in 18carat gold with a few diamonds for good measure in a little Jewellers near the centre of town that came highly recommended (for Louise – not me!) Who said that romance is dead!

That was after walking to Arthur's seat which has commanding views over Kandy via a Royal park which the guidebook warned was the haunt of romantic young couples and it wasn't much of a park but true to the guidebook every bench and wall was taken with canoodling couples – in a culture that makes life difficult to express affection in public – this is obviously the place to go. Then we walked to the best restaurant we have found so far for a seafood curry and fried rice and a very welcome bottle of wine. Sri Lanka has a long way to go to rival Malaysia, which is definitely "first world" in almost every aspect although in terms of cleanliness it easily beats India.

Back home, David and Linda, Louise's mum and dad, we hear partook of the annual fish and chip supper and quiz at St. Peter's but told us their table didn't win. I'll bet it was that pesky choir team again – just wait 'til next year. Anyway, I'm thinking of getting a part-time job here to replenish my funds. It shouldn't be too hard for someone who doesn't speak a single word of Sinhalese.

Spiritually, we continue to do our evening worship which includes the travellers prayer I always end "Soul food" with (apart from last week because I forgot and left it off – more haste less speed) and we are now three chapters into Philippians. We have already read Romans, 1& 2 Corinthians and Galatians and Ephesians and we go through the past day in classic Ignatian fashion, noting where God was noticeably present. Short answer - We worship an incarnational God and He comes to us in all the people we meet – regardless of race or religion.

The Prayer for Today is going to be the same one I'll be using throughout my Sabbatical which we read every day – the Jewish Traveller's Prayer.

**May the God who called our Father Abraham
To journey into the unknown,
And guarded him and blessed him,
Protect me too and bless my journey.**

**May his confidence support me as I set out,
May his spirit be with me on the way,
And may he lead me back to my home in peace.
Those I love I commend to his care.
He is with them, I shall not fear.
As for myself,
May his presence be my companion,
So that blessing may come to me
And to everyone I meet.
Blessed are you Lord
Whose presence travels with his people.**

Love and Prayers,
Martin