

Dear friends,

We hired a car and driver to go north to the “cultural Triangle” about 70 to 80 kilometres North of Kandy. We stopped at a spice and herb garden along the way where I was offered a neck, back, shoulder and head massage which was a bit unexpected to say the least. Louise declined but I thought, why not. So that is what happened- shirt off in the middle of a reception area. A bit like going to a Garden centre in the U.K, and being given a massage in reception (I’ll spare you the photo).

**Anyway**, we went first through a Muslim area and then a Tamil area to a wonderfully ornate Hindu Temple. We weren’t allowed inside because it was the occasion of one of their festivals or “Puja” as they are called here. Puja means “reverence, honour and worship” and so Easter would be seen as a Christian “Puja”.

Then we came to the first stop in the cultural triangle called Dambulla. Up a myriad number of steps we came to five caves which were full of Buddhist art and statues of the Buddha in various poses. Each cave is closed for 15 minutes each day for a Buddhist “Puja” and the caves were definitely spectacular.

**I’d read** a book by William Dalrymple before we came called “the Golden road” which places India at the centre of religious artistic and scientific influence in East and South East Asia and Buddhism was their first great religious export which influenced cultures from Japan to Sri Lanka and as I’ve mentioned before Buddhist missionaries were definitely documented as being in Alexandria way before Christ and as I’ve also mentioned before is in my view the source of Monasticism in the west which started in the deserts of Egypt. Incidentally their other great export which truly affected the whole world was the concept of Zero -0 -. This mathematical revolution started in India, and transported Westwards via Arab traders and eventually to the west.

**Anyway**, after Dambulla we went for lunch, but I couldn’t eat because I was so nervous about climbing the “Lion Rock” the most iconic symbol of Sri Lanka at Sigiriya. I was already tired from climbing up all the steps to the Dambulla caves and the Lion rock has 1,200 steps to the summit. It was 32 degrees and a few wispy clouds in the sky. I had serious doubts as to whether I’d make it. Enter the scene, as we approached the bottom of the rock an Angel called Malinda. He offered Louise his assistance which she refused and then took my Hand and guided me up the first few steps. He literally held my hand up all 1,200 steps and all the way down again, advising us when to stop, get our breath and take on water. Seriously I don’t know if I could have done it without his help. No one else had such help that I could see but I am beyond silly pride. Louise did it all by herself of course which is highly commendable though she said coming down was a bit scary from time to time. Anyway, the palace ruins at the top were the legacy of one of the shortest-lived Singhalese kingdoms and the only fact I can remember is that the king had 500 wives - so no shortage of energy there!

**Eleven years ago** yesterday we were getting married in St. Mary’s church Gainford, where I was Vicar along with St. Andrew’s in Winston. There were three hundred at the service (followed by bucks’ fizz and cake for everyone) and 170 at the reception because we couldn’t find a venue that could cater for any more than that. My best friend Paul. Who is a practicing Buddhist, was best man and gave a speech at the reception that should have been recorded for posterity (people still talk about it).

Ironically, we had plans to spend our honeymoon in Sri Lanka but cancelled because we couldn't handle the hassle after all the work organising the wedding, so we ended up in the Lake District which is only a couple of hours from County Durham.

**Now we** are sitting in a rooftop restaurant overlooking Kandy in the place we originally planned to come all those years ago. The earrings and necklace weren't worn because we are keeping them safe until we get back and this is the most westernized restaurant we've encountered so far, but when we both ordered crab curry, we were forcibly reminded that we are still in Asia and the first thing that arrived at table was a pair of nutcrackers. Nothing here seems to get filleted or dressed so the meal was a little messier than planned. That same evening, once we'd returned "home" the Buddhist monks were chanting all night. I awoke at 3am and they were still at it. I'm not sure if this was a special day in their calendar or not, but to pull an all-nighter, it must been an auspicious time.

**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