

Dear friends,

It was a three-hour drive to Polonnaruwa through wooded hills and lakes – Sri Lanka really is quite beautiful. I am still trying to shake off a weeklong chest infection and Louise a case of “Delhi Belly” or whatever the Sri Lankan equivalent might be (oddly we think it wasn’t anything to do with Sri Lankan fare at all, but ironically some fish ‘n’ chips at a western style pool bar).

Polonnaruwa is a huge sight covering many hectares and there lie the remains of an ancient capital of Sri Lanka and original home of the Buddha tooth relic before it finally came to rest in Kandy. A repository of massive remains of an ancient Buddhist (and Hindu influenced) kingdom built in the 12th century. Ancient stupas and Hindu Temples and swimming pools and indoor plumbing – it was like roaming around an eastern Pompeii. We needed a car and guide because the site was so large and I’m sure we only scratched the surface and in speaking to some practising Buddhists it transpires that they also worshipped in adjoining Hindu Temples. Like in many Oriental holy Places, even ancient ones, you had to remove your shoes and headgear to show respect that you were stepping on holy ground. It was very hot and we’ve not drunk so much water ever. Even when you don’t think you are sweating you must be and it just has to be replaced – the heat and closeness is very sapping. We had a lovely curry buffet on the way home and an absolutely beautiful can of cold beer!

On Sunday we decided to go to Mass at St. Anthony’s cathedral. It was supposed to start at 11am. We got there at about 10.40 and the cathedral was full of children attending Sunday school - Dozens and dozens of them. It was very organised, and they were very well behaved kept in line by the odd nun and Sunday school helpers. At about 11.15 the bell sounded, the “Big six” (candles on the high altar) were switched on, and we were underway. They had a relic of St. Anthony that attracted much devotion, (shoes off of course) a statue of Mary and Jesus illuminated in gaudy Eastern fashion, and a “Calvary” that attracted similar devotion. At the end, the priest walked up and down the aisles and showered the whole congregation with Holy water (I mean you got seriously wet) Mass was less than an hour and my only criticism is they didn’t use incense, which I thought unusual for a catholic cathedral. But as ever, as we’ve found on numerous occasions, the spirit was good and Christianity is in rude health here as it is in all the countries we’ve visited. It is marked by oriental cultural additions of course, which I think enhances the worship but the worship is always sincere and quite humbling and devout.

Afterwards we visited some Buddhist and Hindu shrines around the Temple of the tooth – we thought we’d lost our footwear at one point but had to pay 100 Rupees to get them back – again the devotion was very humbling. People offering water and flowers and fruit. Coming from a society as secular as Britain such unabashed displays of faith can be quite disarming. No-one has to defend their belief in God – it is a given - and you just get on with it in whatever culture or tradition you have been born into.

On this Wednesday we will embark on an organised tour of Sri Lanka including a wildlife park (with a night under canvas – groan), Ella and Nuwara Eliya in the high hill country, and a visit to Galle (Biblical Tarshish) and a Tuktuk tour of Colombo and I don’t know where we’ll be or whether we’ll have internet access so this may well be the last contact until we arrive back in dear old Blighty at the very end of the month.

Have I been spiritually broadened and deepened – which was the goal of this Sabbatical? – I sure have. It has left an indelible mark on my Spiritual outlook and belief system. Some of my points of view have been strengthened and my resolve has hardened. Christianity is primarily a religion of Grace. This is our strength and our good news to the world. This is why we prosper in whatever environment we find ourselves. God is a God of GRACE. Grace IS the good news. That is the truth and understanding that truth sets you free to appreciate all that the other faiths have to offer knowing that God's truth is forever embedded – incarnated – within them all – but pre-eminently within the Christian revelation which is wide enough to embrace everything the other faiths bring to the table whilst being true to Christ being “in all and through all.”

I've had confirmed to me that my preferred personal worship is thoroughly catholic, sacramental, and incarnational (it always has been – but that is now strengthened) and privately thoroughly Ignatian (a set of practices named after Ignatius Loyola). I have had thoughts concerning my future which I'll remain tight-lipped about for now, but all will become clearer in the future. I'm looking forward to presenting this Sabbatical in church soon where we'll be force feeding you curry (only joking), perhaps playing a bit of Bhangra (Punjabi rhythms fused with Western music), wearing our Indian garb and taking you all on a journey to South and South-east Asia and their diverse cultures.

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