

Dear friends,

India is home to over 1.4 Billion people – the most populous country in the world. One in six of everyone alive today in the world lives in India – a sobering thought. Religion is everywhere and very visible. We encountered Hinduism, Buddhism, the Jains and the Sikh religion. We even encountered a slither of Christianity in Shimla at the “John in the wilderness” church where I was asked to bless our guide and the church warden (I should have charged – I was on holiday).

The undoubted highlight of the trip was the Golden Temple in Amritsar. A beautiful place and the heart of the Sikh religion. Horrendously crowded, it would have taken queueing for two hours to get inside during the day. We were lucky in that we went to the ceremony where they put their Holy book to bed in the evening (Their Holy book is treated as a living person) and on the spur of the moment our guide said come quick. We held hands so as not to be separated in the crush and eventually made it inside. We made it to the very top of the Temple and it was an unforgettable experience.

Touring the kitchens was another unexpected highlight. The Golden temple is the largest free canteen in the world serving 50,000 to 100,000 a day, round the clock 365 days a year and is open to absolutely everyone regardless of race, religion or caste and all staffed by volunteers tithing their time and money. They wanted us to join them, and we had to say that we had an alternative lunch date but did share a chapati and dahl with them.

The Temple is surrounded by water which is considered to be Holy and I was charged with collecting Holy water for my sister-in-law Rashpal, a practising Sikh. Our Sikh guide got it for me as I could see myself falling in causing some sort of international incident. The word Sikh means a seeker, someone searching for truth.

Water also plays a central role in Hinduism, and the river Ganges is considered to be a Holy river. In Haridwar – a Holy and completely “dry” city, thousands come every day to wash in the river and cleanse themselves of sin. There are also many funeral pyres along the banks and the ashes of the deceased are thrown into the river also.

Another of the highlights of the trip was visiting Dharamshala, where the Dalai Lama lives and heads the Tibetan people in exile. While visiting a Tantric monastery our guide waited until I was slightly separated from the group and said “I can sense your spiritual energy and I want you to bless me”. It was a surreal and very spiritual moment for me. I blessed him. The day got more surreal as we visited the Dalai Lama’s Temple where hundreds of monks were chanting some unearthly dirge led by an very amplified leader. It turns out that the Dalai Lama’s brother had died and we had stumbled onto a mourning ceremony. This “chanting” I’ll call it, went on all day for a week apparently.

Shimla was important because of its special place in the history of the British Raj. It occupies a spectacular position in the foothills of the Himalayas and I admire the drivers

who negotiate the steep, winding and crowded streets. Smoking in public places is banned in Himachal Pradesh (the state where Shimla is the capital, so are plastic bags and spitting! But actually, in the whole time we were in India I hardly saw anyone smoking at all. For information, Himalaya means “house of snow”.

One of the places we visited in Rishikesh was the ashram where the Beatles had their “spiritual awakening” in the late sixties with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. They can’t develop it as a resort because it nowadays falls within a Tiger reserve where development is Banned.

At the end of this cultural/religious tour we flew to Southeast India where my brother and sister-in-law live in Chennai (formerly Madras). It was hot and sunny in the foothills of the Himalayas, but it was absolutely roasting in Chennai. It was mostly 34 degrees with my phone telling me it would feel like 39 degrees due to humidity. We relaxed there with family until it was time to depart for the U.K. We’d heard about the war starting obviously so were a bit concerned as to how we’d get back but actually we arrived back half an hour early flying over “safe” countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan (who are also at war by the way) and Turkmenistan.

This was a thumbnail sketch of our trip which hardly scratches the surface of our adventures. Now I’ll précis our readings as normal and furnish a thought and prayer for Today.

Sunday 22nd March – 5th of Lent

I will preside in All Saints at 9.30am and St. Michael’s at 11am. Chris Cant will preside at the 8am at St. Peter’s and Archdeacon Trevor Jones will preside at 10am. .

Ezekiel 37: 1-14. The Hebrew word Ruach is translated three different ways in the story of the valley of dry bones. Breath (v6), wind (v9) and spirit (v14). Even in the aftermath of a battle where dead soldiers bones have been eaten by scavengers and bleached by the sun- God can restore life even in these desperate circumstances. A very early – 6th century BC – notion of life after death.

Romans 8: 6-11. In contrasting living according to the flesh and according to the spirit, Paul is not denigrating the human body in any way but contrasting living according to two different mindsets. Living according to the flesh doesn’t mean gluttony or indolence, or vanity but means living in a way shaped and controlled by the values and standards of the world in rebellion against God.

John 11: 1-45. A monster passage that deals with the last and greatest of Jesus’ signs – the raising of Lazarus. God, as the author of life works through Jesus to demonstrate His power over life and death. Jesus not hurrying to the tomb is puzzling but doesn’t point to a lack of compassion – Jesus wept (v35) but saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate God’s power to restore life.

Thought for today

The open meal at the Gurudwara is an excellent example of a facet of true communion. In the Christian communion we sometimes forget that yes, we make our communion with God but the other aspect is that we make our communion with each other. Let's not forget as well that although our Eucharist is based on the Last Supper, it also carries echoes of the feeding of the 5000 and also the fact that open meals were a feature of the ministry of Jesus. Open and inclusive meals were actually one of the things that really annoyed the Pharisees. "He eats with tax collectors and prostitutes" is one of their well known charges against Him. He was also denounced by his detractors for being a "glutton and a drunkard". Let's not ever forget that the heart of the Eucharist lies the fact that it is a meal – a highly stylized meal but still essentially a meal. I understand why it has developed in the way it has. At Holy Saviours in Tynemouth (the church I was at before Devon) I used real bread to a recipe taken from the Old Testament called Ezekiel Bread (minus the human excrement I hasten to add) as it was sold by a local artisan baker. But eventually I was forced to stop that because of concerns over "reverential consuming" of bread left over. Goodness knows what they'd have said if they knew I fed it to the birds, which I thought was a beautiful concept. It is undoubtedly messy of course, and I've never had the guts to introduce that in Devon, but the original meals of Jesus were also, I'm sure, messy affairs and not the pristine, clean and choreographed services we are used to. However we celebrate the Eucharist nowadays the meaning is exactly the same as it always was – a communion with God the Father, through the sacrifice of Jesus his Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit and a communion with everybody else in the church as well.

The Prayer for Today is a very short prayer by Teresa of Avila expressing her trust that God is always present.

Lord,

You are closer to me than my own breathing

Nearer than my hands and feet

Amen

Love and peace,

Martin