

Dear friends,

India!

A seamless flight from Sarawak and we arrive in Chennai – the south-west Metropolis and capital of the state of Tamil Nadu in India. A very different culture – huge, shambolic, messy and hot. We are picked up by “Sam” my brother-in-law’s driver and taken to Rob and Rashpal’s palatial home overlooking the Bay of Bengal with marble stairways, a pool and around four staff and fantastic views over the Bay of Bengal. It is luxurious but this is just a staging post (I assure you) on our way to our next adventure – a week in an ashram a gruelling six-hour drive away.

Before going there, on Sunday morning we attended Mass at St. Thomas Basilica (which houses the tomb of St. Thomas – “Doubting Thomas”). It was a lovely service, in English, with chants and prayers led by a choir. There were many Indian overtones, especially the garlands of flowers surrounding the altar. While not being a fiend for relics normally, along with St. Mark’s in Venice, and St. James in Santiago, St. Peter’s in Rome, it feels good to attend places where an Apostle has their remains for it provides another level of connection.

Sacchidananda ashram is another world. We arrive in a state of a little anxiety wondering what on earth we’ve let ourselves in for. It is hot and dusty and the room we are allocated is basic – sleeping on boards again and cold showers! They only serve vegetarian food, and it is the same morning noon and night - Rice and veg eaten in complete silence. As many of you know I am used to a monastic regimen from my training in a monastery but that was many years ago and I have I suppose “gone soft”. The day starts at 5am with the “Angelus” – a prayer lauding the incarnation of Christ. 5.30am is meditation. 6.30am is morning prayer, eucharist and then breakfast. (By this time you feel like the day must be almost over until you look at your watch and it is still only about 8am!).

10am is coffee and you can talk to the others.

Then at noon we have the Angelus again and then at 12.15 we have midday prayer a meal and silence.

3.30 is tea where you can again talk to the others

4pm is “Satsang” a theological talk by Fr. Martin – the guest master. Then at 6pm we have the “Angelus” again followed by meditation and silence. At 7pm we have evening prayer and supper.

At 9pm we have Tamil praise singing called “Namajapa” and then silence.

And then we do it all again the next day and so on. So lots and lots of meditation, silence and worship.

What is special about this ashram is that it is Catholic but is also a synthesis with Hindu wisdom, iconography, ritual, and liturgy. A product of the second Vatican council in the 1960’s which declared “The church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions”. Worship is conducted on the floor on mats (though chairs are available for westerners or the infirm not used to it). We are anointed three times a day with a different colour on our foreheads. First “Sandal paste” at morning prayer – a symbol of divinity, “Kumkumum” at midday prayer that symbolises the third eye of wisdom. At evening prayer we are marked with “Vibhuti” which symbolises the cleansing of all sins.

After each service we then have “Arati” the waving of a burning flame and incense before the central shrine and then offered around to each of us in turn to wave the flame towards our own faces to symbolise that “we” are the light of Christ in the world. Hindu symbolism is also used in the offertory of the mass. They offer four elements, water, earth, air and fire symbolising the entire cosmos with the altar at the centre of it all. The altar and congregation are sanctified by the sprinkling of water on it and then on the congregation. Eight flowers are placed ritually on the “Tali” (the sacred plate on which the bread and wine are offered) and then we chant in Sanskrit. Then incense and Camphor are offered. The sacred name of God in the East is OM. That is chanted liberally through all services. I am used to chanting “OM SHANTI” at Yoga at home in East Budleigh (Yoga itself is a Hindu practice). The chants in Tamil and Sanskrit are hard to follow for an outsider admittedly and even the English can be difficult to understand sometimes in heavily accented Tamil speakers but there is an air of holiness that is engendered. Union with Christ is the centre of the Eucharist. Readings are not only from the Bible but also from other wisdom religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

There is no insider or outsider at this ashram and all who attend the Mass receive the body and blood of Christ. The brothers at the ashram are very welcoming indeed and the guests are like a gathering of the UN. We had very interesting conversations with Spaniards, French, Danish, other English and of course Tamils and I learned a lot from a Tamil priest there on an R&R retreat who has a church nearby and he has thousands (!) in his congregation. I told him that by English standards we in the RMC do very well indeed.

The ashram church is built like a South Indian Temple, and I’ll explain the symbolism more when I get home. This Sabbatical was to see me “broadened and deepened” spiritually and this place has offered that in spades. I even got a new insight into Christ being “fully human and yet fully divine” using Hindu thought patterns about levels of consciousness. (I’m still mulling that over!).

Now I’m back in Chennai at my brother-in-law’s house and the effects of the ashram experience are still being distilled. On the way home to Chennai Sam dropped us off (unbidden by us let me say) at a KFC for lunch – they do have them here and he thought it would be easier to order something with pictures behind the counter and using a debit card – it wasn’t). I must admit after a diet of nothing but veg, rice and tea since we arrived at the ashram an “American zinger and chips with a coke” tasted like the best thing I’ve ever tasted in my life. Any way we have a few more days to go before we fly to Sri Lanka and we have a few sights and churches and memorials we intend to visit. Rashpal (my sister-in-law) is a Sikh and she is going to show us round the Gurdwara and we want to visit a mar Thoma service on Sunday. Oh and it’s my birthday on Sunday as well. 63. Where did the time go?

Sunday worship we travelled to an “Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian church” for Christians from Kerala. What can I say about this worship experience? It was FANTASTIC. We were warmly welcomed both before and in the service. A man came and sat next to us to help us find our way through the service, which was in Malayam – but with English translations (occasionally) on a screen. The singing before the service was so loud it was ear splitting. Then they drew back the curtains to reveal a truly splendiferous sight of clouds of incense, candles, robed helpers and a priest

dressed in gold facing the altar. The priest sang beautifully, and we were just stunned by the whole experience. When we were introduced to the congregation the deacon said we wouldn't understand much that was said but we'd feel the spirit – and we did! They are basically like the Orthodox church we are familiar with. Priests have to be married to be a priest – unlike the catholic church of the west where they have to be single. They use the Orthodox affirmation of faith (without the infamous “filioque” clause) used half the world's supply of incense at different points in the service, most (but not all) the women wore scarves on their heads, we were barefoot, and the sermon raised quite a few laughs (I wish I could have understood any of it). Interestingly there were absolutely NO icons at all – a major difference to European Orthodoxy. We have exchanged contact details with the priest's wife who is from Detroit in the USA of Kerala heritage obviously. This was the highlight so far of all the worship we have experienced and if we ever return the Chennai again, we will definitely return. Before the offertory there was a time when anyone celebrating a birthday, or an anniversary could come forward for a blessing. I was so mesmerised by what was happening around me that I completely forgot that this was indeed my birthday – so I missed out there. This is the church that St. Thomas planted in India in the first century and we felt blessed that we could be a part of it.

My sister-in-law, Rashpal is a practicing Sikh and she took us to her Gurdwara in central Chennai. It was lovely having a guide to the protocols and symbolism around us. For once, Louise wasn't the only one inappropriately dressed and while I was wearing my indigenous South Indian clothes, I had to don a bandana to cover what little hair I have left. I was introduced to the priest (Granthi) and I was photographed with him in front of the bedroom where the holy book spends the night. Their Holy Scriptures are moved to the main hall from where the scriptures go to sleep at night in a ritual at 4.30 in the morning and then put back to bed at 7.30 in the evening. The book is revered by a steady stream of Sikhs. You are expected to wash your hands and feet before entering the gurdwara and before we left, we were each given a handful of food as a blessing (everyone gets some). The Sikhs are known for their hospitality and every person who comes is entitled to a meal and they have a dormitory and rooms for people down on their luck. Each gurdwara flies a special flag (I forget what it's called) to signal to all that this is a place of refuge. There are only two Sikh temples in all of Chennai because the heartland of the Sikhs is the Punjab in North India far, far away. Ironically there are probably more Sikh temples in Birmingham than here. Whilst Rashpal is Singaporean, she is ethnically Punjabi. We stayed and prayed in the temple (I'm sure guru Nanak didn't mind me praying the Hail Mary, Jesus prayer and the Lord's prayer to preface my personal prayers) because They believe as we do in the one God who is truth.

Still have to visit St. Thomas Mount where he was martyred and then prepare for the next and final country on our schedule.....Sri Lanka.

Love and prayers,

Martin