

Dear friends,

The Petronas towers are amongst the most iconic landmarks in the world. The tallest twin towers in the world and an excellent example of modern Islamic styling. They are absolutely enormous – the stark facts can be found elsewhere. The tour to the cross bridge and then to near the top – about 86 floors – was stunning. KL is quite an eye opener. At the base, the huge Mall had every chic designer store in the world but even here we ate very reasonably in a little Japanese place (You can perhaps see where my priorities lie!).

A view from the top of the Petronas towers over downtown KL.

On Friday we got a taxi to Melacca (Melaka in modern Malay) to where Malay culture really started with the original sultanate, but then conquered by the Portuguese first, then the Dutch and finally the British. It is the cultural centre of Malaysia and a historic epicentre of Chinese migration to the Malay Peninsula. A completely different feel to that of KL – a UNESCO world heritage site – a maze of Chinese shop houses – a lively night market and a lovely waterfront. We visited the original church of Melaka - St. Paul's, originally a Catholic church built by the Portuguese, changed into a Protestant church by the Dutch, then finally used to store gunpowder by the British – does that tell us anything about our national characteristics I wonder? The oldest extant Protestant church is Christ Church which is still a lively open church. It has a cool calm interior and I went through my morning prayer there. Because the congregation is presumably predominantly Chinese nowadays, the walls are also garlanded with fans and Chinese lanterns. If I didn't know it was a protestant church, I would have sworn it was Catholic as it had a lovely altar and murals behind the altar. Chinese New Year is huge in Malaysia (29th January) and KL is already being lit up by firework displays and Chinese restaurants and Chinese businesses closing down for the festivities. While in Melaka, they have a street called "Harmony street" so called because there are so many Hindu Temples and Buddhist shrines and a Mosque co-existing in harmony. Visiting the Mosque, Louise again found herself "inappropriately dressed" (quite a theme developing here) and she had to don a hijab to enter.

Speaking to our friend Maw Pin, the Islamisation process started to gain momentum in the 80's and 90's. She recalled that when she was at school, no girls wore the hijab but today they are omnipresent. Alcohol was everywhere but today it is harder to come by (but by no means impossible you'll be glad to hear and to which we can testify!). So the situation is reminiscent of say Turkey or Iran or a few other places where a resurgent Islam has become very dominant in society.

Sunday service saw us being taken to the "non-liturgical" service at the cathedral today. I say "non liturgical" but actually everything was there in the same place as the liturgical service and a few songs instead of hymns but just a bit more informal and no robes. We had the same sermon as last week (They do the same sermon at the liturgical and non-liturgical service every other week). What I noticed is that the congregation was much more Chinese than last week. There were a few other races present but not many. And communion was only available in those silly sachets with a biscuit and a drop of Ribena in it – urgh - they must get them from the Methodists.

Anyway – one superb Chinese meal later – and we are already starting to think ahead about the next leg of the Sabbatical – even though we still have a week left to go in KL. We leave on Saturday. We will still be in Malaysia but flying to Kuching in Sarawak (Borneo) for an organised tour of this Island of Orang Utans, verdant jungles, caves, former head hunters (at least I hope they are “former”) and kayaking rivers and staying in traditional longhouses in the jungle. Because of this and uncertain of internet connections and time to do it, there might be a lull in communications for a couple of weeks, when we’ll then be flying to India for the second country on this odyssey – but I’ll do the best I can.

After finishing reading the Koran, I have returned to reading various Buddhist sutras from across this part of the world. All I can say from our impressions of Buddhist Temples and their fantastical scriptures, Eastern Buddhism is a very different beast to what we might recognise as “Buddhism” in the West. Lots of statues, incense, prayer wheels and what looks very much to me like worship of some deity very unlike the rather austere atheistic meditative choice popular in western countries. The constant cycle of birth, death and rebirth is called “Samsara” and there are a zillion different heavens and hells as far as I can make out as well as many different multiverses. But karma is central – doing good to affect where you will re-birth in the future. What they seek to adhere to is called the Dharma – a universal (God given?) code or ethic that teaches right conduct, and right thinking. I’ve only scratched the surface of course of this, the very first Indian religious export that changed the East for ever. I was pondering various things (as you do) and it occurred to me that monasticism – that in the Christian sense – started in the deserts of Egypt, before migrating to Europe may well have had its roots in some kind of contact with Buddhism (for which monks and Nuns are a big thing) in Egypt. It is documented that there were Buddhist Evangelists as far west as Alexandria on the Egyptian Mediterranean coast well before the birth of Christ and their influence on the apostle Thomas (read the apocryphal gospel of Thomas!) is near unmistakable (Doubting Thomas who was martyred in Chennai, India).

On a very personal note, on a WhatsApp call with my daughter Claire, we learned of the death of my mother-in-law, Shirley from my first wife – Alexandra. That’s the last of Claire’s grandparents. I have a photo at my house taken out the front of my vicarage in Gainford in county Durham, and out of the whole group of people in the photo, I am the only one still alive. That’s when you know that you are getting old I suppose – Tempus Fugit.

However, I realise these missives have been quite long and I’ll try and be more brief in future but next Saturday in Kuching (the capital of Sarawak, Borneo) we plan to attend the Catholic mass in the evening and I’ll be in touch when I can.

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