



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST THOMAS
PILGRIMAGE TO KERALA
2014

by James Dunlap

Two dozen of us, mostly from St John's, went to Kerala in southwest India from 24th January to 1st February 2014 on a pilgrimage led by George Thomas and Susan George. We benefitted immensely from their intimate knowledge of Kerala and its churches and their hard work organising things.

Kerala is over 20% Christian. Its Christian churches by tradition were founded by St Thomas the disciple in 52 AD. That tradition

is far from fantastic. The St Thomas churches certainly go back to at least the fourth century AD, over 1000 years before European missionaries reached India. Some one third of Indian Christians belong to them.

On Sunday 26th January we worshipped in St Francis Church Fort Cochin, which is the oldest European church in India. The Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama's body was originally buried in this church, but after fourteen years his remains were removed to Lisbon.

On Monday there was a liturgy at the Orthodox Theological



Seminary at Kottayam, in English for our benefit. We then sat down with M. P. George, who had presided at the liturgy. He had studied Russian Orthodox liturgy in Russia, and was delighted that I also knew that liturgy and spoke Russian. He discussed ecumenism. "We like it, but we won't change our liturgy or theology. I often start ecumenical meetings with Hail Mary. Most of them aren't too happy with that, but that's fine!" He discussed too the role of women, relations with other denominations and religions, the war in Syria, Marxism (it and capitalism both failed to create equality) and much else. We also met His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Paulose II, the Catholicos (primate) of the Orthodox Church of Malankara.

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On 28th January we met Dr Philipose Mar Chrysostom, Metropolitan emeritus of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar. He was 95, physically feeble, and spoke so softly he could only be heard up close, but had a sharp wit and dropped provocative, paradoxical pearls of wisdom:

- Anglicans and Orthodox used to excommunicate each other. Now they're good friends, but still not in communion. The church's real problem is people don't have the religion Jesus has.
- A communist politician once told me: "I don't believe in God." I said, "You are right. But God believes in you." Man with limitations has a hard time understanding God without limitations.
- A friend was asked, "Do you believe in God?" He said "No". The fact that he doesn't believe in God doesn't mean that God is not there. So I don't trust him on this. But he is my friend.
- God is somebody who is there, whether you believe in him or not.
- No one has ever seen God. The God you know is not the God that other people know.
- Please come again. If I'm not here, come to heaven. I'm an old man. But I am happy to hear that there are people in Hong Kong who want to see me.

On 31st January we met leaders of the United Christian Movement, which unites 15 Christian denominations for prayer, worship and other activities. In answer to a question, one said they don't try to cooperate with the government because that just guarantees that nothing will happen. "They want bribes even to give money to orphanages. But some government people are helpful and good."

The last two days in Chennai we visited St Thomas Mount and St George's Cathedral, Church of South India, had lunch with Sunday School teachers who'd previously visited St John's, and did some shopping before departing for Hong Kong late that night.

