

# Passage to India

## Newsletter 3 Newsletter

Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2025



### Extracts from travel diary

#### Friday 14<sup>th</sup> February

At a meeting of past and present students from the Bethesda Biblical Seminary I am invited to give the address. There is a concern that numbers coming forward to train are declining. I am mindful of similar concerns in the UK. Students make very considerable sacrifices to study and face a frugal lifestyle in the service of the kingdom. Opposite – bunk beds where they sleep. My text is John 21:1-8



#### Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> February

A new chapter in my passage through India begins when I board an express train to Chennai - a trip of 224 miles. My carriage is spacious and air conditioned. The same day 15 people are crushed to death in Delhi central station trying to board trains where conditions are frighteningly congested. I am met in Chennai by the son of a pastor who takes me on a 90-minute car journey to their home.

#### Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> February

Pastor Gideon is an amazing man with a passion to spread the Gospel. He has established 60 churches and appointed 30 pastors to lead them. Today I share in the worship of two of these communities followed by supper in which I am to only person eating – the others just watch!



#### Monday 17<sup>th</sup> February

Today I am on a tour of the village churches that Pastor Gideon has planted. We travel in a car only recently repaired from when a lorry smashed into it from behind. The family had a near miraculous escape but being shown the photograph of what can happen on the roads just before the journey begins does not fill me with confidence.

#### Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> February

It is time to move closer to the centre of Chennai and so my bags are packed, and we drive 50 km into the centre of the city. Here I have a bit of time to myself and take a rickshaw to the beach. The temperature is 31° and most people are sheltering indoors or under shade. However, I am still invited to take a ride on a white horse which I decline and meet a lady begging for money carrying a small monkey.



#### Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> February

My guide for the second part of my visit to Chennai is Richard, a very charming youth minister. The day is spent riding on the back of a large Yamaha motorbike weaving through the crazy Chennai traffic. We visit the site of St Thomas' martyrdom and an amazingly beautiful English church with: "By the command of the King and parliament of England" written in Latin on the outside. Richard is a great guide, and the day ends with a lovely family meal and some magic tricks.

The picture on the right shows the moment, two years ago, when a mechanical digger is used to destroy one of Pastor Gideon's churches. Factions in the village objected to people converting to Christianity and the church was raised to the ground. On Sunday I am invited to speak in its tin replacement. I tell the story of Coventry Cathedral, and the story of hope is greeted with obvious delight.



I arrive in Chennai on a fast express train from Bangalore and am met by the family of pastor Gideon who has been ministering in the locality since 1992, the year that I first came to India.



Chennai, formerly Madras, on the east coast of India will be my home for the next week and Pastor Gideon's sons Robin and Richard will be my guides. I am travelling light with a small bag and my ruck sack. Sunday is my first full day in the city, and I am collected early at 7.30am by Robin who takes me to a café for a cup of sweet coffee. He looks at me with a concerned expression. "Are you coming like that?" I am wearing a blue T-shirt and grey slacks. "It is all I have." I reply. "But it is our custom to wear buttoned shirts." The churches in Bangalore have no such dress code and no one had advised me otherwise. It was agreed that since I would be the first Westerner to ever visit the church, my casual appearance would be understood as simply part and parcel of the strange world from which I come.



At 8am we arrive in the church where between 150 – 200 people were already worshipping and indeed have been there since the service began at 7am! The first hour had been, it seems, just the warm-up. Since it had all been in Tamil, I have



been spared the effort of sitting through 60 minutes of not understanding anything. Pastor Gideon then stands at the podium and announces to the assembled worshippers: "A great missionary from England has come among us!" There is then a period of thunderous applause before I am given the 8am to 9am sermon slot. Fortunately, my words must be translated into Tamil and so I only have to speak for around 30 minutes in total.

It is, nevertheless, a somewhat daunting task being the great missionary from England and having to address one of Pastor Gideon's 60 churches which he has established in the region during his long ministry. To say that I feel like a fish out of water is a slight understatement. Having been brought up as a good Anglican secure in an undemonstrative middle of the road tradition, I am now in a very lively Assemblies of God (Pentecostal) church. However, I soon warm not only to their generous welcome but also to the several occasions when what I say results in rounds of applause and shouts of "Halleluiah!"



As the service progresses, I reflect on the whole cross-cultural experience. Here I am, with my pale skin and my strange attire, and there they are, men on one side and women on the other, speaking a different language and with a very different worshipping tradition. And yet we are also all part of the same family, sharing the same bible stories, following the same Jesus and praying the same prayers. It is with this thought that I conclude to yet more applause, and I hope it won't be the last time God takes me into the unknown to show me more of his amazing family.

## For Prayer



Please can you pray for the following:

- For all who continue to commit themselves to full-time Christian ministry despite the sacrifices.
- Christians who face real persecution for their faith.
- Pastor Gideon and his on-going ministry to bring the Gospel to places that have never heard of Jesus.
- Prayers for my journey to Hyderabad next week would be much appreciated.