Worship with the St Thomas Christians in Kerala, India
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I was taken into the sanctuary with the other clergy for the beginning of the service of Holy Communion or as they would say the Holy Qurbana. The preparatory part was held with the curtain closed and at the beginning there were few in the church. Gradually the clergy changed into various robes, the president in a brightly coloured cope-like garment with a dove motif in the centre. You could hear the people coming in but could not see them. Lessons were being read and people were settling for the service.

The introductory hymn was sung and as the curtain was drawn back a loud blast of singing filled the sanctuary along with clouds of incense. This was the reformed version of the Syrian tradition and something quite unlike anything I had experienced. Here was a Christian community at worship.

Christianity came to this part of the world, southwest India, in 52AD with St Thomas. This makes you a bit foolish if you ask 'when did your ancestors convert?' People are very proud of their apostolic heritage and some families and churches claim direct descent from the work of the apostle. There is a mixture of worship at home and in church. We were visiting some families of the church one afternoon and went to see a very poor family. While many have benefited from family working overseas this one had not and lived in a three-roomed house with plastic sheeting for windows. Grandma sat in the corner reading a Bible. As she struggled to her feet it was clear that she had had a stroke. The room contained pictures of Jesus and Mary very prominently, indeed many have only these pictures. At the end the family pulled out a mat and we all faced east (how they always know which way is east I never know). We all recited a set prayer, the kauma, which is a mixture of praises, like the sanctus and the Lord's prayer. The bishop then prayed for the family in extempore prayer. Finally we all went to the bishop for an individual blessing. If you walk down the street at evening, you can hear families doing their praying.

Evensong was also a favourite. The bad bit was the mosquitoes biting through my socks for their evening meal. The good bit was a number of families coming to church for prayer, it was a community event. Much like ours, it is a mixture of psalms and hymns, the first section sung by the clergy and those who understand, in Syriac. The next section of hymns was sung in Malayalam with some gusto. Not being up to these languages it was the ceremonial that spoke to me.

At one point the censer is given to one of the clergy. He then goes to the bishop who piles on incense. The altars are then censed. The tombs of the previous bishops are censed: back to the bishop to cense him. Then the clergy are censed; they are standing as a group (there are no pews in this
church). But then you go right down the middle to the west door censing all the people and at the door you cense the world outside. You return censing more of the people and go back to the bishop for a blessing. I had to learn this, as one day they said, 'Tomorrow you will do it!' It took a few attempts to get it right. But my view of it was that heaven and earth, clergy and people, church and world were all being united in prayer and offering to God in the action of censing. We are all one in Christ Jesus. This cosmic vision is acted out each evening in small village churches in Kerala.

Now it is easy to romanticize the church. But you find very quickly it is not ideal. There are seven different versions of Syrian Christians, some of whom are fiercely fighting in courts. There is also a growing secularisation. As people are getting richer and more modern, so they are forgetting the patterns of worship. Television is now popular and in most homes. It is gradually destroying family worship. The questions of the modern world are having to be faced as western views become more prevalent. But there is a community feel to life that is strange to a westerner. Marriages are still arranged. The personal columns in the papers are not individuals trying to find a partner, but families advertising their children for matches. Church electoral rolls are not counted by individuals as here, but are measured in families. Most important is the liturgy which is known by heart. People do not go to church with books but simply join in. Sunday school is not at the same time as the Qurbana but at another time. So the congregation is men, women and children. Men are on one side and women on the other. The final blessing at the end is clergy, men and then women and children. So there is a hierarchical view of things, which we might not like. However, they know the service by heart and all join in. It is much more complex than Common Worship including up to fourteen or more different eucharistic prayers in common use.

Their community feel is in part reinforced by the community rule that you marry within the Christian church. Indeed, in history the Syrian Christians were treated as a separate caste by the Hindu society in which they lived. While an important part of society, being merchants and shopkeepers, the Syrians have never ruled in Kerala, previously being under Hindu kings and more recently under elected communist governments.

The prevailing culture in south India is Hindu. Christians live out a life with some accommodation and some rejection of that culture. A really good church festival has elephants; now that would liven up the church fete. These elephants are from the temple, and also go to mosque festivals. They are real inter-faith elephants! This is an accommodation to culture. However, in the peace you touch your neighbour. Hinduism is generally a non touch culture, you might pollute yourself if you touch the wrong person. You greet people by putting your hands together, but you do not touch. You don't see people holding hands in the street or if you do you can make disparaging remarks to them. But in church you touch. This is the Christian way.

Perhaps the big difference is our individualism. This affects our coming to worship, services being a collection of individuals not a gathering of families. This is of course related to our mobility, but that is a growing problem in
Kerala. They are now beginning to build old people’s homes. Children are now living in Australia or Canada or both and widowed mum is left in the family home in Kerala, alone.

It is perhaps the tight boundaries that have been kept in the Christian community that make its worship so central. But there is also a doxological element to orthodox worship that we find in some of our best hymns but is more central to the service. We are quite ‘teachy’ in our services, which are about learning or telling. The Syrian services are more doxological, “lost in wonder, love and praise”.

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