

The Churches in Cambridgeshire have had a special link with the churches in India since 1990. The Cambridgeshire Ecumenical Council are linked by covenant with the Diocese of Vellore in the Church of South India. Although the Mar Thoma church isn't part of the Church of South India, all the Christians – whatever denomination, feel that they owe their faith and existence to St Thomas. St Thomas' recognition of the risen Jesus as Lord and God led him to witness to the people in India. As he recognised the risen Christ in the scars of Jesus' hands and feet, his vocation was to be the hands and feet of Jesus. As they recognise Jesus with them as Lord and God, today's Christians are called to witness afresh to the risen Christ.

This is Rev Paul Whittle, Moderator of the Eastern Synod of the URC, and current Chair of the Ecumenical Council, and Bishop Sharma, elected Bishop in Vellore last year. As well as its many churches, the diocese of Vellore has primary and secondary schools, a college, training courses for school leavers, an agricultural college and 3 hospitals. They work amongst people of all faiths, sharing Jesus love in all its fullness to those who are the poorest of the poor.

In the centre of Vellore is the Christian Medical College hospital, started by Dr Ida Scudder. It is now one of the foremost hospitals in South Asia. In the current situation, it is one of the COVID-19 testing centres.

This picture is in the tiny Christian hospital in Vandavasi. The artist felt as if Christ was present in the touch and care of the hospital staff

And Christ has to be present. Social distancing is a prerogative of richer people. We had some visitors from Vellore with us as the coronavirus was beginning to take hold in India. One was a nurse from CMC, Vellore. She commented 'how can the people in the slums in Vellore and the other cities practice social distancing when they have no water, no sanitation and live with so many people in a house?

India experienced lockdown suddenly on 24th March, with 4 hours notice. The majority of labour force in India are daily wage workers, many are migrants come to the cities for whatever work they can find. Some have travelled across many states. They earn enough to feed their families for that day – but they have no money set aside to keep them going in harsh times. With no means of support, most of the daily wage workers wanted to get themselves and their families back to their villages, but there was little in the way of transport to help. Only now, 6 weeks later, the government, under pressure, has offered free or subsidised transport for the migrants to get back to their villages. In some cases, the villages don't want the migrants either, fearing they might be bringing Coronavirus.

Moved by the need to keep people safe, churches were closed to services or worship, to regular meetings.

The bishop urged the churches to gather what resources they could – particularly hand sanitizer, face masks etc – for the hospitals

And this is why. This is an isolation ward, prepared and ready, in one of the Christian hospitals.

The bishop also urged the churches to feed the hungry – the migrants and daily wage labourers who have nothing to eat. In fact, he told the churches to put aside building projects and share what they have with the poor. Here, one of the priests, Isaac, is preparing a meal for migrants and for the police.

Sacraments become strange things – the bishop is offering hand sanitizer to the market sellers near his house....

Irrespective of faith – these ladies are being given face masks

130 people were given a biryani meal in one pastorate – people from the leprosy centre, rice mill workers and others.

Voorhees College distributed hand sanitizers, dettol, face masks to police, and food to the poor.

And families are offered 'life in all its fulness' – here in the shape of food parcels rice and lentils and spices to give them meals.

Bishop Sharma wrote on Palm Sunday

As a first servant of my CSI Diocese of Vellore, I have been going through lot of pain, agony and anguish over the unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. With a great struggle within myself, I sent the advisory to all my Presbyters and Lay Leaders to close down the churches for gatherings and worship services. I cannot imagine the way we are placed in the Holy week.

However, I took it on me to be with the suffering lot on this day of celebration of Palm Sunday, for the impending deliverance of this crisis contextually. We arranged a kit containing 3kg of rice, other groceries and variety of vegetables to last for 4 to 5 days and gave to 25 migrant workers identified through local sources. We also arranged through local church leaders and gave away thousand masks, hand sanitizers, soaps, detergent powder packets to nearly 500 people majority of them are marginalized slum dwellers and street vegetable vendors.

This process started from 8:00 am and lasted till 10:30 am which usually is our worship time. I had to wipe the tears of few migrant workers and it was a touching moments. We did not gather as a crowd. We spread the timing and people.

We cry "HOSANNA" along with the crowd who triumphantly journeyed with our saviour to Jerusalem.

We thank God for the blessing to be with the suffering lot on this Palm Sunday.

I have handful to do along with Rev. Fernandez, other lay leaders, Mrs. Jessie Sophia, Bishopamma and my son Mariyan for the whole day.

"Hosanna ... Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David. Hosanna...in the highest"

Church in the Market place is the message of Palm Sunday. Amen

Bishop Sharma has called his pastors to pray regularly – at 7, noon, 4 pm
8.30 pm

in his latest pastoral letter, he has encouraged the pastors to share about their faith experiences in this time – rewriting faith affirmations. Share that with you as I hear it

We covenant – to pray regularly for one another;
to strengthen the links of Christian Fellowship, to exchange ideas and learn from each other's Christian experiences, to give mutual support and encouragement to one another.

In these days after Easter, as we sit with St Thomas, in front of the scarred Christ and say with awe 'My Lord and my God', let's remember brothers and sisters in many parts of the world – but particularly those we are in a covenant with, in India, responding to their vision of Christ by service, as the hands and feet of Christ today.

Prayers from India

Servant Christ, help us to follow you deep into the waters of Baptism;
to link our lives with all those who grieve
about the unjust way of our human life;
to break free from the chains of past wrongs;
to become fit to face your coming new age;
to be renewed by your Spirit, anointed to preach.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you.

Servant Christ,
help us to follow you in untiring ministry to town and village,
to heal and restore the broken body of humanity,
to cast out the demonic forces of greed, resentment
communal hatred and self-destructive fear:

Servant Christ, help us to follow you.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you
into the place of quiet,
to intercede for the confused, the despairing,
the anxiety-driven,
to prepare ourselves for costly service with you;

Servant Christ, help us to follow you.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you into the upper room,
to share your meal of bread and cup,
to accept our common place in your one body
broken to create a new humanity.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you onto the cross
to recognise the true way of life in your death
to see our hope in your self-sending love
to die for all within us not born of your love.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you.

Servant Christ,
help us to follow you out of the dark tomb;
to share daily in your resurrection life,
to be renewed daily in your image of love,
to serve daily as your new body in ministering to the world.
Servant-Christ, help us all to follow you.

Ending

Thomas answered Jesus 'My Lord and my God!'

God of our salvation,
you have restored us to life,
you have brought us back again into your love
by the triumphant death and resurrection of Christ.
Continue to heal us,
as we go to live and work
in the power of your Spirit,
to your praise and glory. **Amen**