

## **ST. THOMAS MOUNT – A PILGRIMAGE SPOT:**

By Dr. Santiago.

Out of the many documents that pertain to the arrival of St. Thomas to the coromandel coast in the city of Chennai, there is this mount name after the apostle. Here is a record of a memorable visit by the writer to this very spot.

Fr. S.J Anthony samy says “The saga of St. Thomas continues. The Lord has his own ways of raising up personal to maintain the rhythm of his work. Looking back into the corridor of history can be a great faith experience. Every event in the long saga of our great apostle can still give us inspiration and courage.”

The English who came to India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century called the place St. Thomas Mount and named the wide road Mount Road meaning that the road leads to the Mount. For many many years this was popularly known as Mount Road and people who have been here since those early years in the city call this road as Mount Road.

The Portuguese called the Mount as “Monte Grande” meaning Big Mountain. The people who lived around named it Parangi Malai to refer to the Portuguese who occupied the place. Even the Railway Station nearby bears the name Parangi Malai.

The ancient Church on top of St. Thomas used to serve as a lighthouse for the Portuguese and Armenian ships sailing the Bay of Bengal in the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The sailors it is said, used to say their prayers for a safe journey when they sighted the Church.

The spot of the historic martyrdom of St. Thomas, the apostle known as St. Thomas Mount is a rising of 300’ above sea level. It is situated in southern part of the city of Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. This place is very close to the Airport, Meenambakkam, from where planes take off to every city in India and every country in the world. It is estimated that there will be one thousand visitors each day to this Mount. It is visited by pilgrims from all over the world. During the season of lent there will be thousands who would climb the 134 granite steps as an act of penance and sacrifice. By the side of the steps there are 15 stations of the cross depicting the agonizing scenes of Jesus as traditionally treasured. The figures that are erected have been moulded with a rare metal that is quite impressive. As each one takes time to gaze at each scene, there is much recollection and reviewing of the master’s last days in his life. The climbing and the viewing would all bring about a spiritual exercise to the well-meaning viewer. The annual gathering of people in very large numbers for the Mass celebrated by the Bishop on Palm Sunday evening will mark the culmination of the Lenten exercise.

On the top of the Mount, one is enthralled to see an erected scene of the crucifixion of Christ with the three standing at the foot of the cross. This imposing masterpiece was erected in memory of His grace Archbishop Louise Mathias in the year 1963. One who reaches the top of the Mount can see many devotees kneeling in prayer before this monument. This brings about an inspiration unique in itself.

There is a gridded open space over here and from this vantage point, a person can have a panoramic view of the city of Chennai. If it is a little late in the evening, one can spend captivating moments watching the glittering planes take off now and then while the whole city with glittering light can be viewed from the place. Those familiar with the city’s landmark could spot some places like the St. George’s Cathedral near the Gemini Flyover and the LIC Building on Mount road (now known as Anna Salai).

### **The Carved Stone Cross:**

The pilgrims who come to the altar of the Chapel stand before a cross carved on a stone. They see an inscription around the cross. It is in 'Nagari Palidu' script and the meaning of the cross is deciphered as 'Though the cross suffering the Messiah – Jesus Christ brought salvation to the world'. This cross was discovered by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup>, Century A.D. when they dug the foundation for the shrine Church.

It is believed that this cross was carved by St. Thomas himself and he used to pray before it. It was on one such occasion that he was pierced from behind with a lance as he lay in prayer before the stone Cross. As a result of the piercing blood had splashed on the cross.

During the Holy Mass celebrated by Fr. Gasper Coelho on the 18<sup>th</sup>, December 1558, this cross sweated blood, according to records. People have received miracles while in contact with this cross in faith. Today, one can see a natural dampness on the surface of the cross that inspires.

This is the blessed sanctuary reputed to be the spot where St. Thomas was martyred.

### **Painting:**

There is a painting that one sees on entering the Chapel depicting the scene wherein a man is ready to kill from behind St. Thomas. One cannot but stand still and spend moments in front of the painting to call to mind that terrible event. After a while and alongside that wall, one can see the portrait of St. Thomas, an impressive one where his eyes are looking a little beyond and with a charisma.

### **The Sacred Relic:**

To the left of this carved stone cross, there is a sacred relic, a piece of the bone of St. Thomas casketed in a beautifully ornamented, monstrance. It is said that people have witnessed many miracles that others had experienced while in contact with this relic.

### **The Picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary:**

To the right of the stone cross, one can see the picture of the Blessed Virgin reputed to have been painted by St. Luke, the Evangelist. St. Thomas had brought this picture along and kept it specially while in prayer. Therefore, this picture is known as the 'Scapular of St. Thomas'.

People who come here and see this painting cannot but be impressed. One gets to think that this is how Blessed Mary would have looked really since it was done by St. Luke who was close to that age and time. This picture is considered to be one of the oldest and the most regarded paintings in India.

After a while the visitors are seen in prayer positions in the Chapel, some lost in thought. One of those who was seen there is a Lutheran who makes it a point to visit this shrine every month. Three belonging to the C.S.I tradition had come there to see and to sit for a while in prayerful posture in one of the rows of benches. Some keep prying earnestly, there are many foreigners too among the visitors with cameras in hand. Many recall in silences those early years of life of Jesus intertwined with the life of Thomas.

Thomas called the twin was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Scholars opine that he was called the Twin because of his close resemblance to Jesus. This would perhaps explain the reason why Judas was asked to identify Jesus so that only Jesus may unmistakably be taken by those who sought his life.

Thomas' attachment to his Master was so deep that on one occasion, he said to the others who were with him "Let us also go with him and die with him". When we consider Thomas' words quite seriously, we would infer that from the innermost depths of his heart, there was a deep desire in him to be Jesus' true follower in letter and in spirit. When said to his companions 'Let us also go with him and die with him', he envisaged to accompany his Master to the Mount of Calvary but his Master accompanied him to another Mount in Chennai, India where he finally arrived.

Thomas is referred to as 'doubting Thomas'. While there is no such phrase in the Bible describing his character, there are many others in the Bible who have doubted in their lives such as Abraham, Sarah and mother Mary too and yet we do not label them and say doubting Abraham doubting Sarah and doubting Mary.

Vedanayagam Sastriar in his musical discourse' on the 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2007 at the venue of the Institute of Asian Studies, highlighted the character of St. Thomas, as one who wanted to have a personal encounter with Jesus. That proved to be the most unique experience for him which prepared him for a life long journey, and which ultimately culminated in giving up his life.

Dr. T. Dayanandhan Francis wrote a book entitled 'Anbanzaippu' (Loving invitation)' wherein he gives a vivid description of the events in Jerusalem from that of Jesus' procession up to the rousing resurrection and that of his appearance to many of his disciples except Thomas. Nallan befriends one by the name Napphali who accompanies him up to Jerusalem. This Nallan is much impressed with the last journey of Jesus wherein people cheer him along the way Golgotha. Nallan listens with apt attention the words of kindness coupled with deep sorrow from Jesus as he hung on the cross. Then he stays on in Jerusalem in anxiety having been impacted with the events. Many days later he gets an opportunity to meet Thomas who had just then emerged out of that poignant interaction, having felt his Master's wounds with his own hands and profession of faith "My Lord and My God" inspired him.

This poetical narrative has the probability of occurrence given the fact that trading was carried on during those days when Tamilians did venture out to far off lands. There is a Tamil saying to the effect that one needs to cross the sea even to seek wealth. In those days it is very probable that this Tamilian merchant by name Nallan would have gone and would have had the rare privilege of being there during the festival in Jerusalem. His way of relating to people was based on philosophy of life prevalent among Tamilians that every place is worth the counting and everyone a neighbour. Nallan, a trader from Tamil Nadu had been there at the time of Jesus' last phase of life.

Some days later Thomas' thoughts extended to the far away lands in the east as he listened to his Master's words after resurrection. It is in this context that Nallan extends his loving invitation to St. Thomas to come to Tamil Nadu. He invites his friend Napphali also and in response he too expresses his desire to come over to see the land of the Chera, Chola and Pandia Kingdoms.

### **Framed Pictures:**

Coming back to the Shrine at St. Thomas' Mount, the images of the twelve apostles and that of St. Paul and Christ-in all 14 in framed picture are on the wall with a miniature depiction of the manner with which each of the apostles laid their lives or glorified Jesus in their very final frame of their lives.

One get have a glimpse of their lives, though in a brief pictorial sketch. To some visitors to this little gallery, the time is never ending because they are really amazed at the call these disciples received from their Master and the willing obedience to that call – whatever that meant to them.

The peak structure of the Hill was built by the Portuguese in the year 1523. The 18<sup>th</sup> December is the day of the Annual Feast of this Chapel that is just a week before the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, the Christmas Day. The Blessed Virgin Mary is honoured as the Mother of Expectation on this 18<sup>th</sup> December because it was on this day that the cross sweated blood during the Holy Mass. The pilgrims who stand before this cross cannot be without observing the dampness on the surface of the cross.

Before the main altar one is captivated by the serenity and the quietness that prevails though the visitors are constantly arriving there to say a prayer or gaze at the cross or read the words imprinted on the wall.

Dr. T. Dayanandan Francis in his play entitled St. Thomas in Tamil Nadu (Thamizhagathil Thomaiyar) brings about the culmination of St. Thomas' mission. With the murder that took place, those who rush to see him at that time find that he is already gone. They were aghast with agony but at the same time they were moved to see the extent of one's love. 'Those without love would like to have everything for themselves but those with love would give away even their bones to others'. This couplet from Thirukural as penned by the Thiruvalluvar, the great poet expounds the very essence of the life lived out by St. Thomas.

His mortal remains were shifted to Santhome where the Basilica of St. Thomas was created to entomb the Apostle's body.

Yet another place where pilgrims go to see in connection with St. Thomas' visit is the Little Mount called Chinna Malai in Tamil. It is believed that St. Thomas used to spend time in meditation and prayer in a cave. A fountain brought forth fresh water to quench his thirst. The visitors make it a point to see this place as well. It is near Saidapet about 10 kilometres from the Heart of the city of Chennai. It is 200 meters off the main road which leads from Marimalai Adigal bridge (Saidapet) to Raj Bhavan (The official residence of the Governor of Tamil Nadu).

There is a tradition that St. Thomas the apostle was actually handled brutally more than once. In order to save his life, he had sought refuge in the thicket of the little Mount. The cave which visitors come to see as an opening, a small one, of about 2 ½ feet which throws a dim light into the cave. It is through this opening that St. Thomas escaped while being chased, it is said. One can see the hand impression believed to be that of St. Thomas.

### **St. Patrice Church:**

This church is situated on the plains of St. Thomas Mount. This is the Parish Church for this shrine area. The Shrine church comes under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Chingleput.

### **St. Thomas Stamps:**

In the year 1964, the India post & Telegraph Department released a postage stamp with the picture of the Ortona silver bust of St. Thomas. The second one was released in connection with the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the martyrdom - that was in 1972 wherein the bleedings cross at St. Thomas Mount is depicted.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II visited this Mount along with his Cardinals on the 5<sup>th</sup> January 1986.

The Apostolic Nuncio to India His Excellency Pedro Lopes Quintana paid a visit to the shrine on the 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2006.

So, this place has gained importance over the years. Now there are plans to renovate and restore the place and its antiquity. Museum is to be instituted to bear witness to the faith and tradition of the believers. A cosmic prayer unction for people to come and to spend a time of prayer and meditation has also been planned.

### **End Notes:**

1. Fr. S.J. Anthonysamy: 'A saga of faith – St. Thomas the apostle of India'. P.123.
2. The writer visited the Mount on the 24<sup>th</sup> February and had a word with the seller at the book shop by the Shrine. After perusing the books and the brochure made available to the visitors, he asked him about the number of visitors. To this he said, 'easily one thousand a day.' It is possible because it was the season of lent. While climbing the hill the passers by said to the writer that it would be a blessing to go up hill as that in itself is a penance.
3. Addressing the delegates of the Second International Conference on the History of Early Christianity in India, Vedanayaga Sastriar. The occasion was the evening cultural programme at the venue of the Institute of Asian Studies when Vijayanagar Sastriar in his musical discourse talked about the Characteristic trait of St. Thomas, the apostle. He threw a new light stating that we must not label Thomas as a doubting Thomas. There were so many others in his day who were doubters. The words 'Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe' sure points to those who would come generations later (like us) and who now believe in Christ's resurrection.
4. The 24-page booklet 'Anbazhaippu' by Dr. T. Dayanandan Francis (1981) is a poetical rendition of a voyage by Nallan who left for Palestine with merchants. Then he reaches Jerusalem. It was at this time that he meets Naphtali who in turn introduces him to the Greeks who had come there to see Jesus. This is an excellent masterpiece that enables readers to think of the possibility of such an occurrence.
5. The book by Dr. T. Dayanandan Francis was first published in 1985. The writer had the privilege of viewing the play when it was staged in Bain School, Chennai. The 65-page booklet portrays St. Thomas' visit to Chennai and his interaction with the people along the coast. His friendliness and his frankness, his meditative nature coupled with his emotional countenance make an impression in this play. He is fluent in Tamil-a possibility because it was on the day of Pentecost that the disciples spoke in tongues-a gift of the Holy Spirit.
6. Much of the information is from the brochure entitled "St. Thomas Mount Chennai the spot of the heroic martyrdom of St. Thomas the apostle" which was available at St. Thomas Mount bookshop. The salient features of the Mount have been given pictorially in this brochure, as compiled by Rev. Fr. Rector & Parish Priest of St. Thomas' Mount Shrine.
7. The information is made available in a little a folder that is very handy and it is entitled 'St. Thomas Monuments in Chennai.'

