

IT ALL STARTED WITH FISHERMEN

Spotlight on our Companion Diocese

BY BISHOP PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

It all started with fishermen. According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas traveled to India and landed on the southwestern coast of India in AD 52. This area, now in the Indian state of Kerala, was known to have had a community of Cochin Jews that dated back to the time of King Solomon. Their presence there in the 1st century AD, made it possible for an Aramaic-speaking Jew like Thomas from Galilee to make such a trip in his desire to share the news of Christ with others.

The 3rd century church historian, Eusebius, tells us that Thomas sailed from Palestine to South India - and on the way preaching in Babylon/Parthia (Iraq) and Persia (Iran). He then headed south to Malabar, on the West coast of India.

The ancient harbor in which Thomas landed was near Kodungallur, in today's state of Kerala, some 20 miles north of the city of Cochin. It was an area known for shipping, trade, and net fishing. He began to preach the gospel there and is said to have established seven churches in the region. Thomas found a receptive audience among the local Hindu and Jewish populations, many of his converts coming from the high-caste Nambudiri Brahmans, the dominant landowning caste of Kerala. Many Christians in the region claim descent from these early converts, which all began on the coast amidst fishermen.



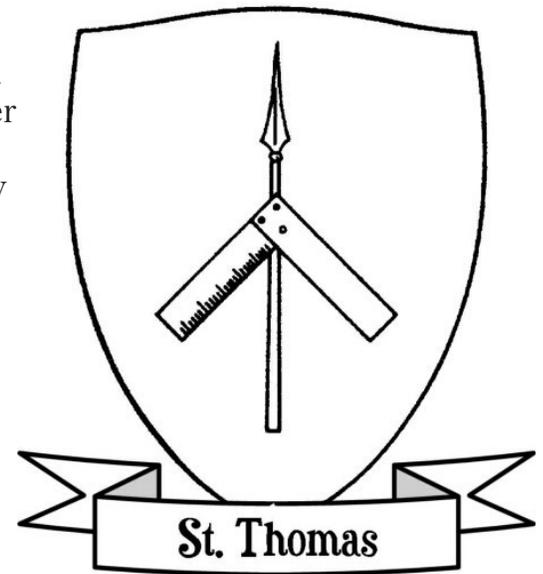
St. Thomas landing on the West Coast of India

Although Thomas first focused on introducing the coastal fisherman to Christ, it is said that his first convert to the way of Jesus was an influential Brahmin Indian, and soon 75 Brahmin families followed, which was the beginning of the establishment of the church in India. The church grew from that beginning into what is today a very large church and one which still expresses many signs of Thomas' influence. Bishop Paul-Gordon remembers seeing a fresco of Thomas in a church in South India, showing him



tanned, bearded and looking very Middle Eastern. He also recalls watching a powerful dance by nuns in the state of Tamil Nadu telling the story of Thomas' mission in India. Thomas is viewed among Indian Christians, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, as the Apostle to India. They see all themselves as "Thomas Christians," and many there are named Thomas.

In AD 72 Thomas was martyred near the city of Chennai, and buried in a place called Mylapore, where we are told that he was thrown into a pit and pierced through with four swords. Which is why the symbol of St. Thomas is represented by a spear (martyrdom), and a carpenter's square (for having built, constructed, the church in India). On a previous visit to India, Bishop Paul-Gordon shares how it was quite a moving experience to stand on what is called St. Thomas Mount, in Mylapore, where Thomas was supposedly martyred. He remembers sitting in a little white chapel built by the Portuguese on the hill, reflecting on the Church in India, with all its life and variety, and the significant impact Indian Christian spirituality has had on his own faith pilgrimage.



In the Gospel of Matthew (4:19) we learn of the moment in which Thomas would have first heard his life's deepest calling. Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." In using this phrase, Jesus infers a very different understanding of fishing than the normal way to describe catching fish. The Greek word used for fishing is not the typical Greek word used for catching fish. It infers "fishing or catching for life," a "fishing or catching for the fish's sake" - in contrast to normal fishing which catches for self-benefit, and which results in the fish dying. Jesus is referring to giving life to people - enhancing their existence in the deepest way possible.

This is a decisive moment for Thomas. Jesus is engaging him at the deepest part of his being, calling him and inspiring him to choose to focus on giving life to people, enhancing their existence in the deepest way possible. Often journeys begin without full details unveiled, with just the spark of a desire deep within and the will to follow. Thomas' quest for truth led him to great spiritual depth and commitment, taking him east all the way to India.

Our companion diocese in South India is located in Trichy-Tanjore in the Tamil Nadu state of India. The diocese is one of the 24 dioceses of the Church of South India (CSI), and was among the first to be formed at the inauguration of the Church of South India, which is a union created of a number of Protestant churches that included the Anglican Church founded by missionaries from the Church of England. The current bishop, The Right Rev. Dr. Dhanraj Chandrasekaran, was consecrated the sixth bishop of the diocese in 2018, and he oversees its many impactful ministries including work in education, hospitals, tribal welfare, publishing, mission and evangelism, and ministry among women.

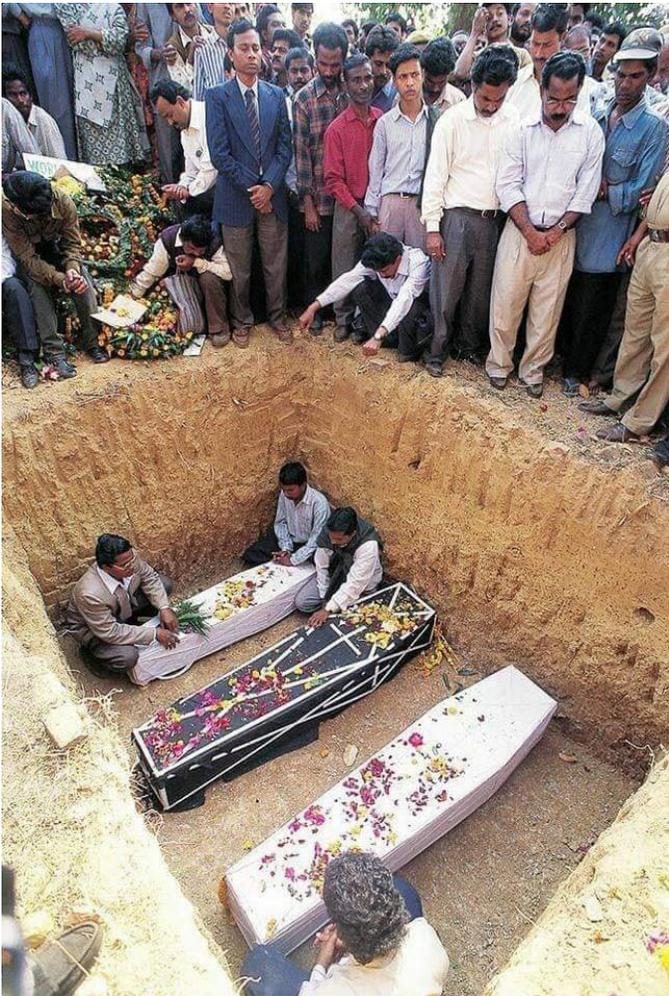


The diocese has 52 primary schools, 2 high schools, 17 higher secondary schools, 2 nursing schools, 1 industrial training center and 4 colleges specialized in Arts & Science, Management, Nursing & Community Welfare. All its institutions are considered religious minority educational institutions and are some of the earliest institutions of the state of Tamil Nadu. The diocese has two general hospitals,

considered multi-specialty hospitals, with modern facilities, infrastructure, and dedicated management and staff.



One of the unique outreaches of the diocese is to provide Tribal Welfare programs in the tribal area of their jurisdiction. They also run their own printing press, producing books and reading materials. Mission and evangelism programs as well as ministry among women are priorities. They seek to empower women, offering various programs and welfare measures toward enhancing social status and wellbeing.



The COVID-19 pandemic in India has presented some critical immediate needs within our companion diocese. In a recent update, Bishop Chandrasekaran shared, “I am writing with a heavy heart as we experience the severe Covid 19 Second Wave and its terrible consequences. I would like to inform you that the Covid 19 second wave in India is at the peak, leaving government machineries, churches and people in a helpless situation. Particularly in the southern part of our country things have become worst. The number of cases are increasing day by day and no beds are available in the hospital; there is a shortage of medicine and oxygen, and of places in the crematoriums. The Government has declared total lockdown and people are confined to their homes. The schools and colleges have been shut since March 2020. I regret to inform you that we have lost many believers and senior leaders of the church and nearly 10 pastors tested positive and two of them have succumbed to Covid. Many are still in hospitals undergoing treatment. In spite of all this crisis, our diocese is working to meet the needs, including organizing relief aid.”

As a diocese we have donated funds toward their vital need of a new ambulance, as well as for emergency costs associated with the continuing pandemic crisis. Next year Bishop Paul-Gordon is planning to make an exploratory trip to the diocese to see how we can be linked in ways that can enhance both our dioceses in the years ahead.

