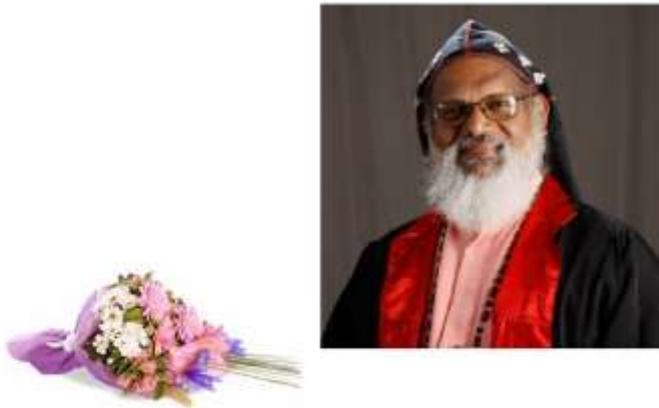


For Engagement, Communication, Harmony And Outreach.

His Grace The Most Revd Dr. Theodosius Mar Thoma Metropolitan



A Publication of The Mar Thoma Church : UK & Europe Zone

An online platform for your spiritual expressions since 2014



January 2021 Volume9(1)



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Editorial

Firstly, I want to wish a belated Happy New Year to you all and congratulations on making it out of 2020 as I'm sure it was far from an easy ride.



The other day, I was watching an episode of BBC News and one thing the editors pointed out was how our Prime Minister kept mentioning the 'Light at the end of the Tunnel'. In these circumstances where it feels like freedom is at hand's reach only to be pulled away at the last second, we lose hope rapidly, but our aim should be to keep that hope knowing that one day we will emerge. Stepping into a new year, our aim should be renewal. We have a New Year, a new Bishop, a new Start and most importantly, a new Hope. The theme for this quarter is "I am the Lord your Holy One... Behold, I am doing a new thing" Isaiah 43:19. Especially now, that verse stands out, no matter how hopeless a situation may seem, we must know that God is there for us - The Holy One. We must be the hope among the hopeless. We need to be patient and see how this all pans out for us but in the meantime, we need to hope and pray. Later in verse 19, God says, "I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

God has given us the grace to enter yet another New Year. Each New Year is a celebration of

God's mercy and compassion. New year permeates everyone with new hope and excitement. Every new year is pregnant with the expectancy of breaking the dreariness and hopelessness of life and bringing newness. Even if we do not realize what the new year holds for us, in absolute faith on the One who holds the key for our future, let us put ourselves in God's guidance and leading.

New is great. As we begin this new year, let us keep our hope in God's power to make things new. He restores lost time, confers new identities, and generates new life. He extends renewed mercy to His children every day. He assures good proposals, projects and plans for a hopeful future to His people.

Rather than looking at the beginning of another year as a disheartening task to be met or an unknown to be feared, let us keep confidence in God's sovereignty over new- new blessings, new trials, new failures, and new victories. God is doing a new thing all around us. Let the intervention of the Almighty break the monopolies, convert dark places into light places, and make hardened hearts into soft and compassionate hearts. Let the providence of God be manifested in giving wealth to the needy and underprivileged, bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, hope to the hopeless, and faith to the faithless. God is doing a new thing everywhere. Tremendous advances in science and medicine may have cured or halted many diseases that for years plagued and destroyed human communities. Walls that separate human communities may be laid down and made into bridges. Let God give power to the powerless by setting the oppressed free. "Behold, I am about to do something new, even now it is coming. Do you not see it? Indeed, I will make a way in the wilderness and streams in the desert".

Editorial Team

Leading the Church for Journeying with Christ



P. M. Mathew

Zonal Secretary - Mar Thoma Church UK & EUROPE ZONE.

It is indeed a blessing and honour for me to contribute an article to the ECHO on behalf of the UK and Europe Zone of the Mar Thoma Church to congratulate the **Most Revd Dr. Theodosius Mar Thoma Metropolitan** and thank God for enthroning Thirumeni as the 22nd Mar Thoma Metropolitan on 14th November, 2020.

We Thank God for allowing Thirumeni to join an amazing and grace-filled group of previous Metropolitans who lead the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church, transformed and expanded the church to a Global Mar Thoma faith-community. After the reformation in the 19th century, by the grace of God, the church had outstanding Metropolitans beginning with Mathew Mar Athanasius, 13th Mar Thoma; it is their legacy and that of our past and the present generations of dedicated and devoted clergy and laity of our Church that Theodosius Metropolitan is now called upon and blessed to lead. Let us assure Thirumeni our prayers and offer our support for taking the church forward under Thirumeni's leadership for establishing the values of God's kingdom for the glory of our creator, saviour, provider and protector.

I have been blessed with several opportunities to associate with Thirumeni and to serve the European region as the secretary of the Council of the Mar Thoma Parishes in Europe (COMPE). It was the formation of the COMPE by Thirumeni in 2009, which laid the foundational frame work for the development of the region and the establishment of the Zone in January 2018 under the guidance of the Late Metropolitan and Philoxenos Thirumeni. It is our hope and prayer that this strong foundational work and the work that is going on now under Philoxenos Thirumeni may eventually lead us to the formation of a Diocese.



The vision and the leadership of Mar Theodosius Thirumeni in the church and society during the last three decades have been visible through various developments, which he initiated in the Trivandrum-Kollam, Kunnankulam-Malabar, Chennai-Bangalore-Malaysia-Singapore-Australia, the North America-Europe and Mumbai Dioceses. I can say without any hesitation that in all the above Dioceses Thirumeni left amazing legacies for others to follow and build partnership for journeying with Christ for God's mission.

Thirumeni's administrative genius is evident in his decision-making style; quick response to any communications, this is particularly evident in the initiatives he took for the administrative reforms of getting young people elected to administrative councils, more English liturgical worship, altar boys and girls, and the formation of the COMPE. He has a God-centred work-ethic, which gives shape to his dreams. Thirumeni has God-given gifts, missionary zeal, shepherding skills, listening and communication skills, sense of justice, and ecumenical engagements. Thirumeni is a consummate

theologian and teacher; an ardent lover of learning, a pastor and a missionary. These qualities are important assets to begin his new journey as a servant leader of the Mar Thoma Church for leading the church for walking with Christ to heal the fractured world.

The way Thirumeni came to write his new book 'The Church and the New Normal' is providential. It was the late Metropolitan Thirumeni who suggested to Thirumeni to write a book while he was enduring 28 days of quarantine in Kerala. As Dr. Zac Varghese suggested, during the Diocesan Felicitation Meeting on 5th December 2020', that this book could be considered as a manifesto of the new Metropolitan Thirumeni, like the Nazareth Manifesto at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. What is the new normal for the Mar Thoma Church under the guidance of the new Metropolitan Thirumeni? The new normal is a fresh emphasis on leading the church for journeying with Christ. 'The Church Journeying with Christ' is the title book published at the Silver Jubilee of the Mar Thoma Diocese of the North America and Europe in 2013. The question of the Mar Thoma identity is important and it is at the centre of its religious, spiritual, cultural ethos, practices and forms of representation. It is in this context Journeying with Christ is central to our existence as a faith community.



St. Paul's faith was born of an encounter with the living God on the Damascus Road, which lead him to accept faith as a gift for a total commitment of his life to Christ. This gift of faith calls us to become one with Christ and have an indwelling experience; it is this experience which gives us the joy of being and becoming the gospel of Christ. Paul's total identification with Christ made him to say: "**It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.** And the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

What would be the emerging identity of the Mar Thoma Church under Theodosius Metropolitan Thirumeni? Is there a paradigm shift in its emerging identity? Where is the authority of the Mar Thoma Church? These questions are important in the search of the identity and mission of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church. The ecclesial Identity of the Mar Thoma Church is both ancient and modern, but it is not be seen as simply as 'the part of the whole' because the first Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, suggested that the Church in each place, is 'fully the Church'

Therefore, instead of thinking of Mar Thoma identity as an already, once for all, accomplished fact after the reformation of 1836 with the new ecclesial worship forms and cultural practices, we should think of the Mar Thoma identity as a work in progress. The reformation is an ongoing process under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is never complete. The changes in Marthomites' life and practices have accelerated in the last century as a direct result of the migration beyond the boundaries of Travancore and Cochin princely states. What does it mean to be a Mar Thoma Christian in a particular diaspora region in the 21st century? The Mar Thoma church has an earlier or traditionally-accepted identity in its ancient Pampa river base, but it also has an emerging identity in its diaspora regions. Both these identities are present in the diaspora regions of the Church and there is also a generational bias in accommodating these two different identities; hence there in an identity crisis or clash. This view generates problem on the question of the very authority and the authenticity to which the term 'Mar Thoma Church Identity' is applied. It also has the potential to open the door for accommodating and

adapting sympathetically to the spiritual needs of the second and subsequent generations of diaspora communities in their special cultural milieu while keeping the core credentials of the historic traditional Mar Thoma Church. Therefore, the challenge before us is to identify the core values and traditions of the church to develop an emerging vision or paradigm, which we need to develop and cherish in its global diaspora multi-cultural and linguistic existence.

The identity and mission of the Mar Thoma Church is the same as that of the vocation of the Church journeying of Christ. In this journey, we are called to conform to the four creedal marks of the Church namely, unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. In the context of the Nicene Creed, they are faith affirmations of the Church. They are also statements of essential Christian doctrines. These creedal marks of the undivided universal church of God—the word, creed, sacraments, liturgical worship, God’s mission and servant ministries – are to be kept.

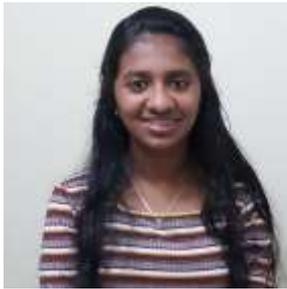
One of the important messages of the COVID-19 Pandemic is that we are all in this together; it is not a Chinese, Indian, African, European or American problem; it is a problem for the whole mankind and God’s created-world. We need to find solutions together including solution for ecological issues confronting us. Journeying with Christ is the way forward because Jesus is “. . . the way, the truth and the life” (Jn14:6). When the church acts collectively, the collective authority of the church provides tools and strategies for resistance to external coercion as well as to resist unilateral imposition of power and authority from human agencies.

Togetherness should be trumpet call for our church, we must make a solemn pledge individually and collectively to establish God’s kingdom values by journeying with Christ. We need to learn to respect and find a balance between episcopal authority and democratic engagement in the necessary administrative aspects and disciplines of the Church and its historic traditions, which gives stability to its identity and continuity for its mission. At the same time, the church should realise that it is facing number of new challenges such as postmodern, rapid cultural shifts and trends from globalisation, conflict between generations, new expressions of faith, and tension between traditional and emerging paradigms of Christian faith. Therefore, the church should be aware of the need to address above issues by empowering its clergy and laity for working together. The Church is on a pilgrim journey until it reaches the New Jerusalem; exile and return is part of this grace-filled experience of wandering tribes with no permanent abode or static structures. In this process, the church relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and on the continued revelation of the Trinitarian mystery.

May **Theodosius Metropolitan Thirumeni’s** ministry help us **‘to be lighted to lighten’** and may his leadership help everyone to walk with Jesus to find peace and harmony in their daily living. *Let us pray to our Lord and our God to give Thirumeni very good health, wisdom and grace to continue the ministry for establishing the values of God’s kingdom on the earth.*



Hope amidst the Covid pandemic in the new year.



*Sneha Santhosh,
St. John's Mar Thoma Church, Hounslow.*

This upcoming new year, there may be many doubts and fears in our hearts as believers, as we face yet another year ahead of us. There have been many changes and unexpected events in our daily lives, this may raise concerns and uncertainty. But amongst all this, there is a loving God who will deliver us and take care of us, carrying us through difficult circumstances.

One of the most essential elements of our lives currently is hope. Hope is one of the three theological virtues. During this pandemic, hope helps us to strive for a better future. It allows us to overcome the challenges we are facing and to trust in the Lord God to strengthen us.



This pandemic reminds us of the very first Christmas. When our Lord was born, he was not born into royalty as a king. Rather, he was born in a stable, in rather difficult circumstances. This year, we can almost relate to the struggles faced by Jesus. Even in the midst of all these difficulties, we can keep our faith in the Lord and understand meaning behind Christmas more.



In Genesis 9, we can see the Noahic Covenant that was made by God. In this covenant, there are many features that can give us comfort and strength in this pandemic. God blessed Noah's generation and promised that he would never again destroy the whole of creation. As a sign, God created a rainbow in the sky to remind Noah of the covenant. We still see rainbows today and this gives us hope, that God will surely keep his covenant and

deliver us.

At the start of this pandemic, we were so afraid, filled with uncertainty and doubt. We did not know how to react or what to expect. However, our Lord God gave us the wisdom to figure out how to prepare and prevent the spreading of the virus through social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands frequently, etc. This is similar to our spiritual journey. All of us are ready to celebrate Christmas - the first coming of Christ. But when it comes to the second coming, we wonder whether we are really prepared. We can take this time pandemic to grow closer to God and to find hope and prepare for the second coming of Christ Jesus.

Psalm 130:7 quotes the verse, 'Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.' We can't put our faith in our surroundings during all these trouble -sometimes but we can always find peace and shelter in our God. His love for us is unchanging and endures forever. We can always turn to him - even amidst a crisis.



I think that during this pandemic, we should reflect on the life of Job and how we should stay strong on our faith in God no matter the circumstances. Job was a very faithful man who was trailed and tested by God. Even though he lost everything, he kept his faith in the Lord and did not doubt or turn away from him. Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation. As we face these trials around us, let us remain faithful like Job and not lose hope. Proverbs 3:5 reminds us that we should trust in the Lord our God with all our heart and not lean on our own understanding. In the story of Job, due to his extreme faithfulness to God, everything he lost was returned back in multitude. Likewise, the Lord will surely deliver us and comfort us, giving us hope to continue.



Romans 12:12 is a verse that guides us. It quotes: 'Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.' This shows us that God is always with us. The only way we can overcome this pandemic spiritually is through hope, prayer, patience and faithfulness. God has a plan for us even before we come into this world and we should trust him and believe in his promises.

In the early stages of corona virus, when churches had to close down, many of us were confused on what to do next. Even amidst this, God provided a solution. Thanks to his grace, we all made our homes, places of worship and opened our hearts as alters for God to dwell in. Now, thanks to God's mercy, we are able to attend regular church services, Sunday School classes and Youth meetings virtually. This is going on very effectively even now and gives us hope for God's grace.



As a sign of God's deliverance, he gave mankind the wisdom and knowledge to create a suitable vaccine for Covid-19. This vaccine is now being administered and it is a physical sign of hope for us that this virus will come to an end. God provided something material for us to rely or believe in so that we gain reassurance.

In this current pandemic situation, we cannot expect the spreading of the virus to stop suddenly. Instead, we must change our view of the situation and have a more optimistic view. Amongst all the changing situation, we must remember that we have the unchanging love of our Father God. 2 Corinthians 12:9 shows us that God's grace is sufficient for us and through hope, we can overcome this pandemic.

In this new year, let us continue to be faithful to God and worship him always. As in Philippians 4:6, let us uphold this pandemic situation in our prayers to him and have faith that he will deliver us through the rest. May the Lord God bless us through this new year.

"I am the Lord Your God the Holy One of Israel... Behold, I am Doing New Things!"



*Dr V Samuel Varughese
Carmel Mar Thoma Church, Liverpool*

Addressing his people, the prophet Isaiah, proclaims about our God that I am your Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour (Isaiah 43 v3). Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by your name and you are mine (Isaiah 43 v1) and behold I will do new things (Isaiah 43 v19). This embodies what the New Year message should be to all of us, after experiencing the turmoil of 2020 with COVID 19 and the fear that has impregnated the world around us. The knowledge of how our God was faithful in the past will help us to know, how he will do new things in all our lives during 2021.

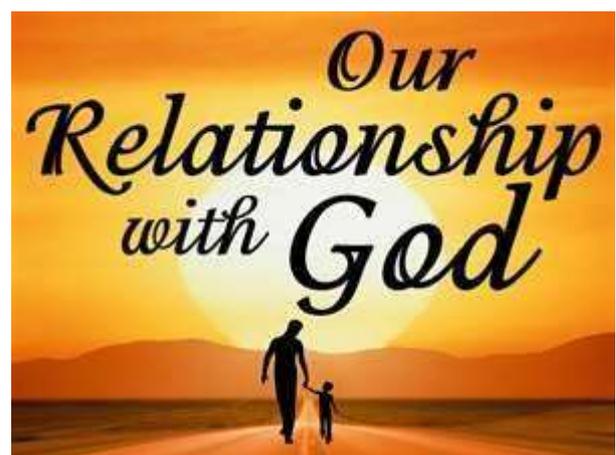
Genesis 1v1 says, in the beginning God created heaven and earth. We need to believe in this tenet of faith, for the rest of the Bible to have any meaning in our life. In Genesis 1v27-28, God created man in his own image, he made them male and female, glorified them and united them in holy matrimony. He blessed them to bear fruit and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, rule over it and look after it.

Our God, being omniscient (all knowing), He knows why we were created, He will map our route in life and He knows all our waypoints and destinations during this journey of life. He created man to have a direct, personal relationship with Him, as friends every day in the cool of the evening, but man was thrown out of His presence as he lost his glory by sinning.



God longed for his creation to return back to Him, to rekindle the personal relationship both individually, as a nation and as His church. Initially, there was only one human race, God continued to mentor them but they transgressed and rebelled against Him by sinning. God in his anger, sent a flood and destroyed everyone but Noah. He started again through Noah and his descendants but they again continued to sin. Then out of nowhere in Genesis 12 he called Abraham, found him faithful. Abraham obeyed God's command, came through the trial of sacrificing his son and by his faith he was made righteous. Then God made a covenant with Abraham, that his descendants will always be blessed and they will be His people and He will be their only God. Furthermore Abraham's blessing was extended to all mankind (Gentiles) through the seed of Abraham and David, Jesus Christ for all those who have faith in him, by receiving and believing in him.

With Israel, God rescued them from Egypt through Moses and Moses stood in the gap to protect them, when God in his anger wanted to destroy them during Exodus. But his people, Israel continued to disobey him and they were thrown out of their

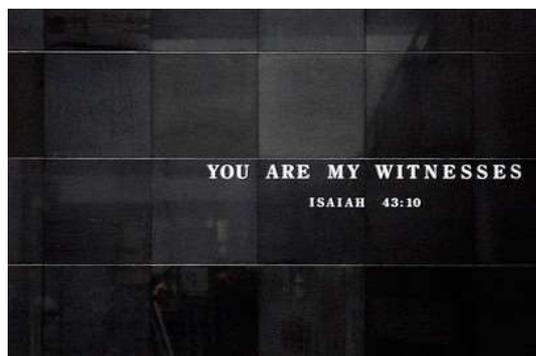


country to be slaves in Babylon (Isaiah 43 v27-28). God relented again, he wanted to witness to them through his love for them and wanted to prove to them that he is their Lord God, the Holy one of Israel (Isaiah 43v3). He forgave their transgressions and did not remember their sins (Isaiah 43v25, Jeremiah 31v33-34) He became their Saviour and redeemed them through Cyrus, the pagan King of Persia, which was foretold by prophets long before.

God did new things in them, by leading them out of Babylon to Jerusalem through water, fire and desert and rebuilding Jerusalem through Nehemiah (Isaiah 43v19). Furthermore, God gave Egypt, Ethiopia and Sheba to protect his people at the time of Cambyses, son of Cyrus proving as in Proverb 11:8 and 21:18 that the wicked became a ransom for the righteous and the righteous one is rescued from trouble. It came onto the wicked, that our God was willing to ransom other nations to save his own people. Furthermore, this ransom could refer to Assyrian King Sennacherib when he was conquering Israel, God diverted him to attack Egypt and their allies. It can also relate to when God delivered them from slavery through Moses.

God's witness

Israel was both blind and deaf to God's approach, yet they are God's witness to the Word. God's witness to us is by His love for us through his Son. Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and life (John 14 v6), I am the bread of life (John 6v35), I am the wine (John 15 v5), I am the Light (John 12 v35-36), I am the door (John 10v9), I am the Good Shepherd (John 10 v14), I am the resurrection and life." (John 11 v25-26).



Our witness

Since God witnessed to us by loving us, we by receiving power from the Holy Spirit must bear witness to Him to the ends of the worlds (Acts 1 v8, Math 28 v19-20). Isaiah made it clear to his people that they should bear witness of their only God to others, by believing and knowing Him as their Redeemer (Isaiah 43 v10-12) and they should not dwell on the former things in Exodus but look to the new things that are going to happen (Isaiah 43 v18-19). We should let others know, God's faithfulness to his people as their Redeemer, Holy One of Israel, Creator and King (Isaiah 43 v14-15). The truth about God's light should be shone in our blind and deaf society, that our God will deliver people from all forms of slavery. For that, we should act as the chosen people, royal priesthood and holy nation that belongs to God (1 Peter 2v9).

God's forgiveness

We should let others know about God's forgiveness, the Israelites did not give any offerings to God but burdened Him with their iniquities and sin (Isaiah 43v22-24). However God forgave their transgressions and He did not remember their sins (Isaiah 43v25). So dear friends, though our troubles and COVID 19, Jesus is inviting all of us who are weary and burdened, to come to him and He will



give them rest. He encourages us to take up His yoke as it is easy and the burden is light (Math 11 v28-30). Our transgressions are blotted, as Jesus has signed the new covenant in his own blood. As Paul says, when we were dead in our sins, God made us alive with Christ, He forgave all our sins by nailing it to the cross (Col 2:13-14)

How is this going to be meaningful in our lives in the coming year? We have just celebrated Jesus coming and have also experienced how God loved the world by sacrificing his one and only Begotten Son (John 3:16). We are all made eligible to receive Abraham's blessing through Jesus. Through his blood, he has given salvation to all those who repent, receive and believe in Him, that they were made the righteousness of our God in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5v17-21). Jesus was raised from the dead as the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep, that in Adam all died and in Christ all will be made alive. Hence as we die in faith in Him, we will be raised as the after fruit at the rapture (1 Cor 15 v20-23). We will then be glorified and can live with Him, just as God was with Adam and Eve before the Fall.

Newness in our life

So as Christians, God is willing to do new things in us as long as we are faithful to Him, His love and compassion fail not, they are new every morning and great is His faithfulness (Lam 3 v22-23). We must love Him by obeying His commands (John 14:23), that our God has a sure plan for us (Jeremiah 29 v11) as His ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55v9). We can experience this when we seek Him with all our hearts (Jer 29v13). As Paul explains no eyes have seen, no ears have heard and not even



conceived in anyone's mind, what God has planned for those who love Him. (1Cor 2v9) Our God shall meet all our needs, this year, according to his glorious richness in Christ Jesus (Phil 4 v19).

God's purpose in us



We can all rejoice that now there is no condemnation in all those who are in Christ (Rom 8 v1), to be in Christ, we must walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5 v7). In this New Year, we must remember as Paul tells us that in all things, God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom 8 v28). This is the birthmark of all Christians that our God knows all things about us, our past, present and future, as He is our Creator, He knew us from our mother's womb (Psalms 139 v13). All things work for good, not through our own good work but through the good work of what God has given to us, through the blood of our dear Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour. So God shouldn't be last, but we

should seek Him first in all things, as he wants to be in the middle of our lives to guide us though to green pastures.

Just as Abraham withstood trials and all generations were blessed through him. Just like Job when he lost everything, at the end of his trials he proclaimed God knows the way I take and when he tested me I came forth as gold (Job 23 v10) and God doubled his blessing. Joseph despite his trials and glory, at the end he addressed his brothers explaining that even the harm they meant to him, God used this for the good of everyone (Gen 50 v20).



God's Son was handed over to the Devil by God's purpose, the evil men nailed him to the Cross, Christ bore all our pain so in our deepest pain he can draw near to us. God raised him from the dead (Acts 2v23) to defeat the power of Satan but if Satan had known God's plan and the power of Jesus's blood, he wouldn't have crucified Christ (1 Cor 2 v8).

We must realise that the Lord our God is faithful and keeps his covenantal love to thousands of generations, to all those who love Him and keep his commands (Deut 7v9). As David says in Psalms 145, He is good to all, faithful to all and nearer to all who call upon him in truth. We can all receive the crown of eternal life promised to all those who love Him (James 1 v12).

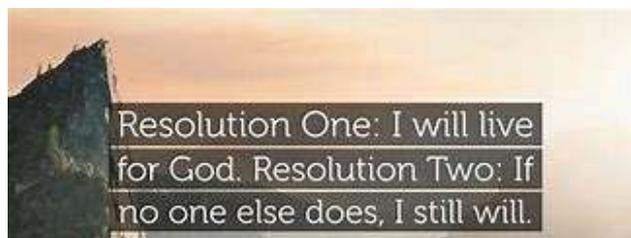


The New Year message, is that our God is good and He can be trusted. We should love, trust and obey His commands with the full knowledge that he is faithful, then he will do new things in our lives. He is our Living God, there is no one like Him, he knows the end from the beginning, from the ancients of time to the time still to come what he has planned, he will do for everyone. (Isaiah 46 v9-11).

, for our 2021 New Year resolution, let us remember that my life is worth living because God sent His only begotten Son to love, heal and forgive me. He lived and died to buy my pardon and because He lives, I

can boldly face tomorrow without fear as He holds my future. So, shall we all wholeheartedly say, that I have decided to follow Jesus, the world behind me, the Cross before me, no turning back, no turning back. Amen

May God bless.
Happy New Year.



Sharing Burdens

(‘Chumadu Thangi–Load Bearer’ and ‘Vazhi Ambalam – Wayside Temple’)



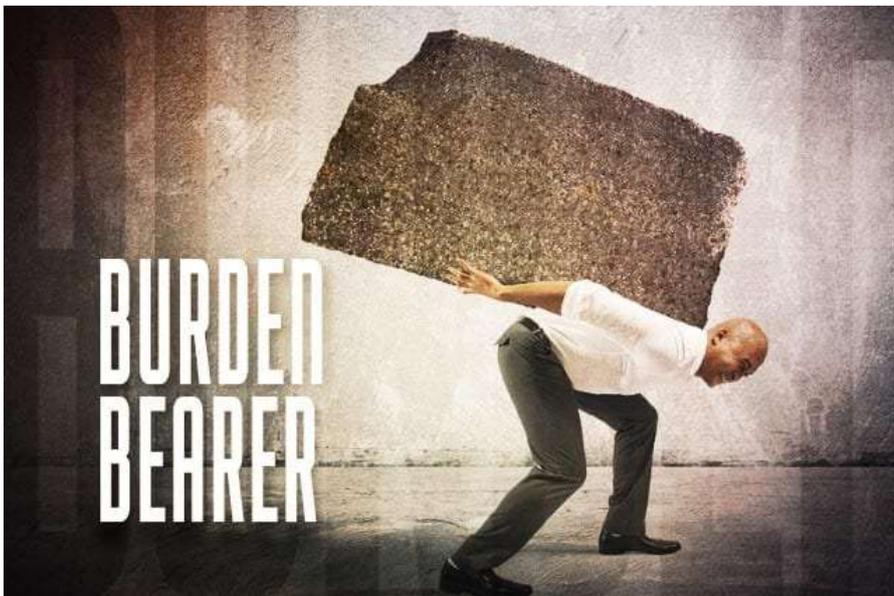
Dr. Zac Varghese, London

*“My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me”
(Psalm 55:4).*

Christmas and the New Year celebrations of 2020 are amid the agony of death, sufferings, deprivations, loneliness, and emotional and physical health-related issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One comforting thought in these troubled times is the message: **‘fear not, God is with us.’** Basil the Great in a homily on the Nativity said, **“God on earth, God among us is no longer the God who gives His law amid flashes of lightning, to the sounds of trumpets on the smoking mountain, within the darkness of terrifying storm, but the God who speaks gently and with kindness in a human body to his kindred: God in flesh.”** May God help us to see His presence in our relationships and interactions with others. May Jesus, who by his incarnation gathered things earthly and heavenly into one, fill us with peace and goodwill and make us blessed partakers of the divine nature of love at this Christmas tide and always.



May I wish all the readers and contributors of the ECHO, a blessed Christmas and grace-filled New Year. The news of vaccine is indeed a very good news and let us thank God for showing the light at the end a very dark tunnel. Sharing the burden is theme that I want to discuss with you for the New Year.



On March 23, 2020, the government of the United Kingdom declared its first lockdown across the nation in order to arrest the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, my mind has been occupied with the thoughts of the devastating impact of the pandemic spreading quickly across the globe. Two days later, 24th March, I woke up with two powerful images of my childhood days, on a farm, in a village in Kerala.

One of these images was that of simple stone structures found on the sides of narrow dirt roads on the banks (‘Varambump’ in Malayalam) of paddy fields. This structure consisted of two heavy stone pillars bridged by an equally heavy stone slab placed horizontally on the top of the pillars. The structure was

called a '*Chumadu Thangi*' in Malayalam, meaning a load bearer or a load supporter. In those days, people transported goods from place to place by carrying them on their heads or on a yoke born on their shoulders. These stone structures were meant to help these people to take comfort breaks. The height of the horizontal slab was such that people could effortlessly push their load on to it to take rest and get it back onto their heads or shoulders themselves when they wish to resume their journey. Our forefathers had erected these load bearing structures at strategic locations for helping people to ease their heavy loads. Sadly, these structures are no longer standing since they have been fallen into disuse after newer means of transporting goods have replaced traditional modes. But for me the strong symbolism of these structures remains firm after all these years.

The second image is that of a '*Vazhi Ambalam*'. This Malayalam term means 'wayside temple'. In those days, people mostly travelled on foot. These simple wooden structures with a thatched roof acted as a resting place for such travellers. These sheltered travellers from the mid-day sun or rain. It was a humanitarian service provided by the community. Sadly, such places of rest, scattered all over the countryside in my childhood days, have also now disappeared. These have been replaced by wayside inns, motorway cafes and filling stations.

Of course, the world has progressed much since my days as a village boy in Kerala. Everything is now just a 'click' away, thanks to innovative technologies. But all these advances have not succeeded in easing our physical and mental burdens. If anything, these have only become more difficult. The pathways of life have become more difficult to negotiate. So, we still need places and people to give us succour and more people seem to be turning to spiritual resources to find solace in these times of tumult.

We now possess many state-of-the-art gadgets that are supposed to make life happier and more comfortable. We have enough weapons of mass destruction to destroy the world. Many nations claim to be superpowers, and many have positioned themselves as economic powerhouses. At last the world has woken up to the meaninglessness of all that rhetoric about being powerful. The world has discovered to its horror that with all its arsenal of nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers and supersonic fighters, it simply does not possess the power to knock out an invisible speck of RNA known as the coronavirus.

The COVID-19 pandemic has killed close to a million and half people so far and seriously challenged the global economy and the lives of billions. We still do not know what to do other than advising people to 'wear masks, wash hands frequently and to maintain physical distancing'! 'Hands, face and space' is the only mantra available so far, in spite of the good news of vaccines, the herd immunity is a long way away. The world is beginning to realize that 'human needs are beyond human help.'



It wouldn't be God's will that mankind should be crushed with excessive burdens. So, let us submit to God to free us today from all our burdens. It is a Tower of Babel moment to realize human limitations with absolute humility. God is glad to carry our burdens and give us the daily strength that we need. Jesus will remove our heavy burdens of guilt and hopelessness and give us true rest.

In the ancient time the Psalmist said, *“Cast your burden on the Lord, and He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved”* (Ps 55:22). The Israeli prophets also assured: *“Is this not this kind of fasting that I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke, set oppressed free and break every yoke?”*(Isa 58:6). Finally, we have the absolute promise of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ: *“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”* (Matt 11:28-30).

In the middle of this COVID-19 crisis, we now mostly remain isolated in our homes of all sizes and shapes under lockdown conditions. Our good neighbours are offering us all sorts of help for easing our burdens and helping us to survive. Let us thank them for their God-inspired generosity; let us thank all the healthcare workers, staff in supermarkets, other support structures and the volunteers who are helping us to fight this indomitable enemy in many ways. One of the comforting phrases in the Bible for these times is *“fear not.”*

One of the most poignant types of suffering during physical distancing is loneliness, a desperate feeling of separation from those whom we love and care for and those who provide meaning to our existence. Loneliness comes in a variety of ways; some of it is deeply hurting. All of us know in some degree what it is like to be separated from relationships. The most painful form of loneliness and separation that can be experienced by a human being is that which comes



with the death of a loved one. As a church we mourned the death of our beloved Metropolitan Thirumeni, I too suffered pain from the loss very dear relatives. It strikes us with the very painful emotion that life will never be the same. Across the world, we had thousands and thousands of such incidents during the last few months. This number is increasing every day and have had reached over a million and half deaths so far.

This pandemic has cast us into a situation in which it has become nearly impossible to even have an adequate grieving process; churches are not able to provide satisfactory bereavement support or funeral services. Instead of using excuses, we must use WhatsApp and such digital communication channels to reach out to such families and people to carry them through their emotional crisis. We need to find alternative ways of helping people in need. Such emotional support is essential to avoid depression and other psychological disorders. When we discover that we ourselves are groaning in empathy with others and do not know what to do or say to others, we would discover that God, the Holy Spirit, is groaning with us as well. It is by this realization that we begin to understand why Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus.

There was a time when the Church was able to serve society as a whole in many different ways – in helping the poor or caring for the sick and the old or providing education for the marginalised children or finding means for meeting other societal needs. But all such responsibilities have now been taken over by the State or different ear-marked charities. We can be thankful for that, but one of the sad effects

of this has been that the Church has become inward looking and concerned only with her own members, instead of those outside.



Let us hope that the post-COVID-19 landscape will challenge every Christian to find once more their primary vocation to embody and implement God's love and compassion in the world. We can only fulfil that vocation in places where we work and where we live. It is true that in the past we converted all support structures as convenient stores for selling merchandises of all sizes and shapes. There is a growing awareness that we have converted our worshipping places into 'wayside inns' (marketplaces for buying a ticket to heaven or fuelling stations of

fake-spirituality). In Matthew's gospel we read: *"The Scriptures declare, 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers'"* (Mt 21.13; Isa 56: 7; Jer 7:11).

Now the doors of the churches are shut, and we are pushed into virtual slots for our worship and prayer through live stream online digital events. Let us use this God-given time to correct our ways and find real worship for giving glory to God within us because we are the temples of God (1Cor. 3:16). May the virtual space become a sacred place for us. In the 14th century spiritual classic, 'The Cloud of Unknowing' it is stated: **"Nowhere physically is everywhere spiritually."** We should experience this mystery in our daily living. The world and our worshipping patterns will be different after this crisis and let us think of the models of 'Chumadu Thangies and Vazhi Ambalams' for sharing and easing the burdens of others around us. An Irish proverb states: "It is in the shelter of each other that people live."

The experience of this pandemic is a challenge for commitment to life rather than a withdrawal from it; it is also a participation rather than passivity; it is about establishing the Kingdom of God on earth rather than anticipating it in an after-life. It may be an opportunity, a space and a time, for seeking a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of life and its God-given purpose. Let us consider 'the gift of the other' and their needs. It is indeed the time for moving from the attitude of 'being-for-itself' to 'being-for-others' and 'being-with-others'. In this process the Holy Spirit will guide us to become 'Chumadu Thangies' and Vazhi Ambalams'.

Let us also take time to thank everyone that we come across in our lives for what they mean to us and how they help us to express our God-endowed humanity. May God continue to bless everyone. We can be absolutely certain that *"God is our refuge and strength, and ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear . . . Be still and know that I am God"* (Ps 46).



Ordinary, unnoticed



Abraham Varghese, Hermon Mar Thoma Church

“Behold, I am doing a New Thing...”

We all love music and songs. Have you considered how many new songs are produced and released every day, around the world, in all languages? One statistic I found on the internet: close to 40,000 songs are added to the popular music streaming platform Spotify every day. That is probably a small fraction of all the music being produced globally. Creating something new is, it seems, second nature to us humans, it seems. Even more, the craving for something new – clothes, food, cars, mobiles and so on – goes to the very heart of how society functions and how, many of us earn a living today. “What news there?” my mother in Kerala asks me when I call her, expecting to hear something new, different and perhaps exciting. Our mobiles buzz when someone send us a *new* message on WhatsApp, and we restless till we find out what it is. Our forefathers lived in very different times, and we often think of them as more content with their lot than ourselves; but I doubt if they will behave very differently if they were reborn in our day and faced the mind-numbing number of choices available today in everything from cereals to clothing to cars.

Given humanity’s endless interest in something new, the theme verse appears to be a promotional message from God Almighty to humanity; “I am doing something *new*”, says God. Our God, the God of Abraham and Isaac, is the same yesterday, today and forever; how could the unchangeable God be doing something *new*? If God is doing something new and different, what does that mean for a Christian, for a Church like ours built on tradition? How are we to understand what God is saying here?



In a poll carried out in Nov’20 by the Pew Research Center in the U.S.A., 86% of Americans felt that there are lessons to be learned by humanity, from the coronavirus pandemic; and 35% felt that the ‘lesson’ was sent by God. I have heard similar opinions expressed by some religious leaders as the world lived through nine months of upheaval in 2020 the likes of which have not been seen in generations. When we hear news of people in far-away lands dying because of lack of access to medicines or doctors, it hurts for a few moments, but then we get back to checking our WhatsApp or Facebook messages. But the pandemic made this – risk of a potentially fatal disease, lack of medical treatment – a reality for each and every one on the planet; we sat up in shock from our plush leather sofas and noticed. A virus, something very ordinary, unnoticed- invisible, in fact, has made the whole world sit up and tingle with fear. Politicians thought they were immune to the virus; some of them ended up in intensive care units. Expensive office buildings in major metros across the world emptied out. There were no business executives or holiday makers queuing up in airports. People who thought they were in charge of running the world had to face up to their essential humanity – they were not in charge anymore. Is all this, is everything that the world is going through due to the pandemic, the sign of God doing bringing forth something new? There was plenty of sickness, disease and hopelessness

around in Israel during Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus walked in their midst, healed some of them and used the disease and death he encountered as an opportunity to bring forth something new in the person affected and the community. In the same way, God can bring to life something new from this global crisis that we find ourselves. The world needs healing – both physical and spiritual. The world needs more of all the beatitudes – faith, hope and love; we pray for more people of faith, for more signs of hope and more acts of love in our communities and around the world. And we pray for discernment to recognise the new things that God is bringing about - in us, in our society and around the world.

But we do not have to wait for global events such as pandemics to discern God's actions. God's way is very different – radically different – from the ways of the world. Actors and actresses make a name for themselves leading roles in blockbusters. Politicians make themselves popular by tweeting absurdities catering to their voting base or making shocking announcements on prime-time television. Some



ISAIAH
43:19

evangelists excite crowds and boost their followers by preaching distorted, but attractive versions of the Gospel – instant healing, assured answers to prayers and personal wealth on the scale of King Solomon. The God whom Jesus called Abba does not tweet to millions, or make appearances in mega churches; in the Advent season that just left us, we were reminded once again of God’s unusual, subtle ways of bringing forth His Kingdom. God chose to be born powerless, into a stable, as the child of ordinary, everyday folks. The child born to a carpenter in a small village never travelled more than 50 miles from his birthplace, or flew in a plane. But through Him, over the last two millennia, God transformed millions of human hearts, turned civilizations upside down, challenged power and authority in every continent on earth and inspired creativity – both artistic and scientific – that has enriched lives in so many ways. “Small is beautiful” was a popular phrase challenging the common notion that bigger is always better; the history of mankind seems to point in the same direction, when we think about God’s ways. God seems to prefer the ordinary, the unnoticed, the silent rather than the limelight of a global stage for “...doing a New Thing”.

The ordinary, the unnoticeddoes that ring a bell? I think that is you and me as well, not just the carpenter and his teenage spouse. God can be “....doing a New Thing” through you and me. The father of a colleague of mine passed away in Oct '20. In today’s world, there is fairly good awareness of typically old age conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer’s, but that was not at all the case three decades ago when my colleague’s father settled in Trivandrum in 1992 after retirement. He was not connected with the medical field; his working life was spent as an electrical engineer in Tamil Nadu. At Trivandrum, he put an advertisement in the local paper: “We are organising a meeting of local families impacted by Alzheimer’s.” In the first meeting, there were about 80 attendees, including doctors working in the field. That was the beginning of the Trivandrum Chapter of “Alzheimer’s and Related Disorders Society of India”. This gentleman, along with his wife, dedicated a good part of their retired life to bring help and awareness and services to local families dealing with Alzheimer’s patients. He was an ordinary hero, doing a new thing, led by God’s inexhaustible Grace, unnoticed by most.



The Mar Thoma Church is no stranger to “...doing a New Thing”. Our denomination was born out of our forefathers doing a new thing; we are a **Reformed** church. And through the generations, our leaders – Bishops, Clergy as well as laymen – have built up on the reformation ideas, by the Grace of God. Since Nov '20, the Church has been blessed with a new Metropolitan, who is sure to walk in the same well-trodden path, bringing to fruition many a New Thing.

Where does that leave us, as individuals? At the beginning of a New Year, in the midst of a crisis, but with the reminder that God is “...doing a New Thing” today, this year, in our midst. It is for us to believe in His abundant Grace, and take up what needs to be done where God is leading us.

Aspects of Loneliness



*Dr. George Mathew**

Although it is a cliché, the current pandemic has given rise to numerous morbidities in increasing prevalence. Various physical disorders have been identified, however little attention is given to emotional and psychological problems. In the media, there has been a heightened focus on anxiety and depression, but the factors that contribute to these conditions have not been given due importance. As there is strong correlation between these psychological conditions and physical disorders, it is important that professionals are able to recognise and intervene as necessary. This is particularly relevant in Western society where social interaction is relatively limited compared to Eastern societies. Whereas previously extended families and close community interaction were the norm, we have moved into a self-reliant position, in which dependence on others is considered less than desirable. Nevertheless, the internet and social media have provided outlets to overcome isolation.



Humans are essentially social animals, and social relationships are essential for physical and mental well-being. In England, loneliness and isolation are widely prevalent particularly in the elderly and bereaved. However, these conditions are creeping into the younger age group due to the restrictions of isolation and limited social gatherings. It is therefore vital that leaders in society, and the church in particular, seek to identify individuals before these conditions progress to psychological disorders.

I remember an elderly patient who was living on her own and did not have any social visits. In the course of history taking, she said that she goes to the hairdresser twice a week to have her hair done. On

further enquiry, she stated that this was the only human contact she considered essential for her. It is important to evaluate other factors in one's life, in determining the interplay of various layers.

Those who have been bereaved in the previous year are a vulnerable group, particularly widowers who were shown to have an excess of deaths in the first year, after the loss of their spouse. Murray Parkes et al in the paper 'Broken Heart' studied over 4000 widowers, and found that there was an increase of 40% above expected rates of mortality in the first year of bereavement, due to cardiovascular causes.

Various instruments have been used to identify loneliness, such as the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Revised) and De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale. These scales are rated subjectively and are a measure of self-perception, mainly for identification and research purposes. They can be used in screening populations for further interventions.

A recent study in September (Groarke) in the context of the pandemic in UK found the overall prevalence of loneliness to be 27%, with a range of 14% to 36% making it a significant public health issue. It is correlated with worse physical and mental health. Various risk factors have been studied including younger age group, being separated or divorced and previous mental health disorder. A greater degree of social support was considered to be protective.

It is possible to look at two categories of emotional and social loneliness. The former consists of a lack of close and confiding relationships, whereas social loneliness is associated with feelings of rejection by society and unhappiness.

There are several outcomes which are manifestations of loneliness which we need to be aware of, as they could be the presenting problems. Negative feelings of self and others are common. Sufferers are less inclined to join in social interaction and relationships. The presence of psychosomatic disorders such as headaches, fatigue, crying and poor sleep should alert one to other co-morbid factors. Passive reactions may include excessive alcohol consumption or drug misuse. If these symptoms are severe, they can even lead to self-harming thoughts and actions.



It is not all doom and gloom, given the appropriate personality and response. There are several religious orders of solitude and silence. They give the individual time and space to reflect on various matters of life and meditation. This concept is seen as a necessary condition for achieving greater closeness, and communication with God.

Psychotherapists have attempted to explain the concept, and in fact have even suffered from the condition. Carl Jung, the eminent psychoanalyst in the 1950's and 60's said that loneliness is associated with a sense of loss of contact with other people, or with personal feelings of isolation. However, he later suggested that it 'does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or

from holding certain views which others find inadmissible'. He wrote a paper "Psychotherapists or the Clergy" in which he discusses the loss of religious faith in modern culture. He believed that the loss of religious symbols and 'Mother Church' are factors in this decline towards isolation. He suggests a 'search for new symbolic forms through which the psychic condition of modern man might find adequate expression'. Being alone and being lonely are different concepts. One can be alone without being lonely, and one can be lonely in a crowded room. Loneliness is therefore a state of mind or emotion, instigated by feelings of separation from other human beings.

According to Age UK, more than 2 million people in England over the age of 75 live alone, and more than a million older people say they go for over a month without speaking to a friend, neighbour or family member. This has considerable implications for churches, charities and voluntary organisations to detect and help.

For some people, certain life events may mean they feel lonely, such as:

- experiencing a bereavement
- going through a relationship break-up
- retiring and losing the social contact one had at work
- changing jobs and feeling isolated from co-workers
- starting at university
- moving to a new area or country without family, friends or community networks.

It should be recognised that sometimes the manifestations could be of aggression. These are mostly passive directed to self in the form of mood and emotional disturbance, self-harm, etc. But occasionally aggression towards others and objects can result. Hence it becomes important to identify and intervene early, to prevent progression to more severe changes.



One of the earliest studies on loneliness and aggressive behaviour was conducted by Zilboorg in 1938, who remarked that chronically lonely people are hostile and aggressive. Two subsequent studies in the late 1970's correlated the UCLA Scale of Loneliness with the Hostility-Guilt Inventory Scale. However, a study published in 1985 failed to show evidence of overt aggression in lonely people. The results showed that lonely males react strongly to rejection, and tend to verbally express hostile attitudes, especially towards women.

Theoretical models have been proposed, which suggest that social skills are acquired in pre-school years, and these are necessary for forming and maintaining relationships in adult life. When these skills are lacking, withdrawal and loneliness may result, which could further lead to rejection and negative thoughts of hostility. It was postulated that loneliness and hostility are inter-related and create unsatisfactory social environments due to poor social skills, and may have the consequence of rejection and greater aggressive tendencies.

What can our community do to address this growing problem in this time of lock down. The first step is to identify those in need. Our church whose mission is to reach out to society, can play a big role in the alleviation of distress. Each parish which has a local presence, can start by seeking out those elderly

people living alone, with poor social support, recently bereaved, and those with a history of emotional disturbance. It may be helpful to form a group to look at these issues, and explore ways to help.

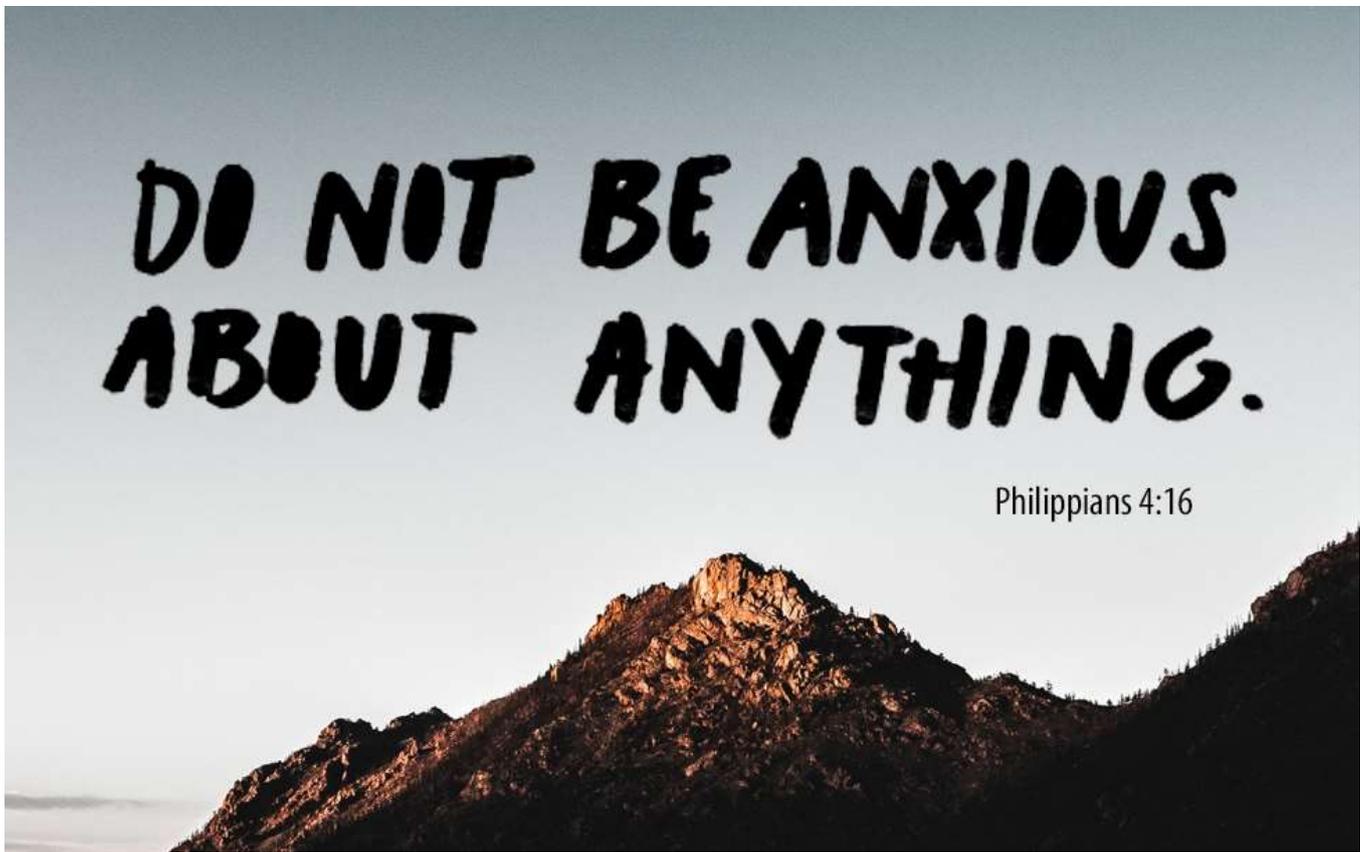
A paper in 2016 by Church Urban Fund identifies three ways that churches can play a part in responding to loneliness: Clearly these interventions can only take place within the constraints of current legislation and good practice in the light of the pandemic.

1. Group based activities are better than one-to-one interventions. Expression of inner feelings to others in similar situations enhances confidence and self-esteem.
2. Activity groups based on mutual interest, such as cooking, music, Bible discussions, etc.
3. Members of groups allowed to take responsibility, and have a purpose. Church related volunteering had a significant beneficial effect on mood, general health and life satisfaction.

Rooted in the Bible, Verse 10 of Isaiah 41 states: 'Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand'.

Philippians 4: 6-7 reinforces the power of prayer: 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Bible gives an account of David's loneliness and despair in his heartfelt appeals for mercy to God, and for His intervention (Psalm 25:21). His son had risen up against him, and he was forced to flee from the city, leaving his house and family.



**DO NOT BE ANXIOUS
ABOUT ANYTHING.**

Philippians 4:16

For the Christian, the remedy is in the comforting fellowship of Christ. This has been the fundamental feature of those who suffered, went to prison and even to death, due to their steadfast belief and faith.

The issue of loneliness and its ramifications have been acknowledged by the Health Service in UK to be of such importance, that a website is available to help alleviate the suffering. These include talking about feelings, peer support, setting achievable targets, relaxation and mindfulness. Points to avoid are focusing on things that cannot be changed, especially images on social media. It is not unusual to resort to alcohol, drugs and gambling to overcome loneliness, and these should be avoided.

The issues of loneliness are complex and need a multi-dimensional approach. Although our Church has played its role, it is possible to achieve greater things if we focus on the human element, starting at grass roots level. We are gifted with the numerous talents of the members, and can make significant headway to address this matter.

** Dr George Mathew was a Consultant Psychiatrist in the National Health Service (UK) for over 25 years and retired from practice in 2015. His clinical interests include mood disorders and epilepsy in learning disabilities. He was a Fellow of The Royal College of Psychiatrists and held various senior medical management positions in hospital.*

Appendix

The following self- assessment scale can be used for measuring the degree of loneliness.
UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8) (Hays & DiMatteo, 1987)

	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN
I lack companionship	1	2	3	4
There is no one I can turn to	1	2	3	4
I am an outgoing person	4	3	2	1
I feel left out	1	2	3	4
I feel isolated from others	1	2	3	4
I can find companionship when I want it	4	3	2	1
I am unhappy being so withdrawn	1	2	3	4
People are around me but not with me	1	2	3	4
TOTAL SCORE =				

I am doing a new thing



Sam Mathew
Hermon Mar Thoma Church

“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:19)

What wonderful words, right! In times of hopelessness and despair, what more does one need than this to lift their spirits? As background, Isaiah 43 is from a portion of the book of Isaiah (often referred to as Second Isaiah) which deals with the end of Israel’s Babylonian exile. This portion constantly reminds Israel of the promise of return to Jerusalem. The contents of Chapter 43, much like those of the previous chapter, look at life beyond the release of the Israelites from their captivity. It shows how God, by his divine foresight, has seen the great and varied trials that lie ahead for the Israelites and prepares them for the ordeals. Through this chapter we also see how God is comforting, instructing and chastising the Israelites; in a way that that is reminiscent of a loving father.

Verse 19 in Isaiah 43 (the central theme for this article), talks about how God is doing something new for Israel. To understand this verse better let us take a closer look, by dividing the verse into three parts. The first part “See, I am doing a new thing....” talks about how God is going to do something “new” for Israel. A continuation from verse 18 this implores the Israelites (and the reader) not to dwell on the past



but in-fact look forward to the “new” thing that God is going to do. The second part “....Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?....” further appeals to the Israelites (and the reader) to be open to the “new” thing that God is doing and take due note of it. The closing part of the verse “I am making a way in the

wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” finally works to allay any fear of the unknown that the Israelites (or the reader) might have, given that the “new” will be an unknown. At its very core, through this verse, God is asking the Israelites (and the reader) to be observant about the new things that he is doing for them, be open for it, and confidently embrace it knowing that God is fully in command.

Cut back to life today and we can see that the words of verse 19 are as true and meaningful today, as they were back then. Also, as the entire world begins the New Year in various stages of lockdowns and restrictions, it would not be entirely outlandish to compare it to the captivity that the Israelites faced – although one might argue the intensity of things is much milder. However, if you were to add-in the humanitarian crises the world faces today (in Afghanistan, Congo, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Zimbabwe and Europe migrant crisis), the looming climate change crisis, and the colossal economic crisis facing the post-Covid world – the balance quickly tilts in favour of times today being just as bad. However, it is in the very midst of this – what seems like the very depths of endless and unending



despair – that we are implored to sit-up and notice the “new” thing that God is doing. At this stage I would ask you to take a pause and read verses 18 and 19 of Isaiah Chapter 43 again.

It is easy to understand from the verses that staying stuck in the past would have kept the Israelites from the new thing that God wanted to do for them. If Israel stayed stuck in the

discouragement of Babylon, they would never have been able to look for the new thing, which God was preparing for them – release from exile. And that, in essence, is our call to action too. Are we prepared to go into 2021, without being burdened with the past? Personally, I don’t think this verse calls for us to ignore or forget the past, but instead asks us to look to future while not being stuck or hung-up on the past. The reason being that it is only when we look to the future that we see the “way” that God has made for us in the “wilderness”, and the “streams” that he has created for us in the “deserts” and “wastelands”.

The start of 2021 has been dominated by lockdowns and the immense pressure that Covid has put on healthcare systems around the world. We have often heard that living in a pandemic dominated world is the “new normal”. However, I think we need to distinguish between this “new normal” and the “new” described in Isaiah.

The “new normal” that we talk about today, a term which has made its way in our daily parlance after the pandemic, doesn’t paint a very hopeful picture of the future. Even the most fervent optimists amongst us would struggle to give anything but a bleak view on things to come, when describing this “new normal”.



This is where having read Isaiah 43, especially verse 19, we can offer a different viewpoint. As a Church and community, we need to be the ones leading the charge on making sure that we focus our attention on the “new” that God is doing, rather than the “new normal” described in newspapers and media. Let us be the ones who offer hope to a world struggling to find hope, while knowing fully well that our God is creating a way for us in this wilderness.

There is an action for each and every one of us towards this. Individually, as families and as a Church, we need to truly seek God’s leading and guidance so that we may be able to observe (and perceive, as the verse in Isaiah puts it) the “new” that God is doing. Key to this process is also coming unstuck from the past, and focussing our eyes on what lies ahead. It is then that we will truly be able to gauge and understand what our God is doing for us, and the ways in which he is preparing us.

Hoping and praying that 2021 is a blessed, peaceful and prosperous year for each and every one of us. Let us fully embrace the new things that God is doing for us!

Reports

Lay Training Programme

Mar Thoma Church: UK & Europe Zone has started a Lay training programme from the month of November onwards. In this series 5 sessions are arranged. 156 persons registered in this programme.

Two sessions of the Lay Training programme have been done.

The first session was held on November 7th Saturday at 8 pm. Rev Dr. P G George, (Vicar Sinai Mar Thoma Church, North London) Led the session based on the theme- 'Know the Bible'. Rev K A Jacob, (Vicar, Carmel Mar Thoma Church, Liverpool, and Edinburgh Congregation) was the moderator of the session.

On Saturday 5th December at 8.00 pm, the Second session was held. Rev Saju Chacko, (Vicar, Hermon Mar Thoma Church, Midland) was the moderator of the session and Rev Binu J Varghese (Vicar, St Johns Mar Thoma Church, UK) led the session based on the theme- 'Know Our Tradition.'

Zonal Christmas Carol Service

Zonal Christmas Carol Service was held on Sunday, 13th December 2020 at 4.00 pm. Rt Rev Dr Euyakim Mar Coorilos Episcopa was the Chief Guest of the service. By God's grace, a Zonal Virtual Choir was formed and members from all the congregations and parishes of this Zone were part of that Choir. Along with this choir, almost all the parishes and congregations presented Carol songs on that service. Zonal Sunday School, Youth Fellowship, and Sevika Sanghom have also presented programs.

Zonal Intercessory Prayer

Mar Thoma Church: UK & Europe Zone is conducting an Intercessory prayer meeting every Sunday evening at 8.00 in a blessed way. The Achens in the Zone have been giving leadership to this prayer. Around 100 families are regularly attending in this prayer meeting.

Zonal Sunday Celebration

Mar Thoma Church: UK and Europe Zone has set apart November Sunday 29th November 2020 as Zonal Sunday. All the members of the congregations and parishes have gathered together for the common worship service on that day. The Diocesan Bishop Rt Rev Dr Isaac Mar Philoxenos Tirumeni led the worship service and delivered the message. More than 550 families gathered for the worship service.

Obituary

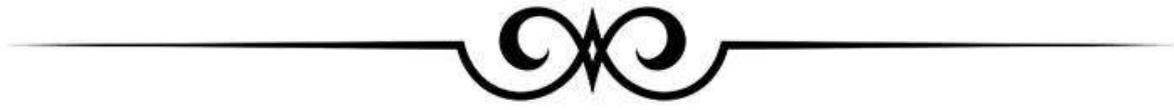
Mr. Ray V Thomas
St. Thomas MTC, Bristol



*A lifetime of
Love and
Memories*

Mr. Ray V Thomas (48 Yrs.), member of St. Thomas MTC, Bristol, was called to his eternal home on 16th December, 2020. Ray had been fighting Cancer from March 2020 and was on the way to recovery. However, he was affected by Covid-19 in the beginning of December. His physical condition started to deteriorate and he had to be admitted into hospital. The entire parish community along with well-wishers around the globe earnestly prayed for his recovery but as per the Lord's plan, He took him back. Ray is survived by his wife Sibil and children, Rinitta, Steffna and Riyanne. He was an active member of St. Thomas MTC, Bristol and was attending church services regularly. His native parish was Jerusalem MTC, Niranam. The

funeral service for Ray was conducted on 31st December, 2020 in UK. Ray has left behind many fond memories to be cherished by his loved ones.



If
GOD
for us,
who
CAN BE
Against Us?

ROMANS 8:31