

# Gospel mission to India

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, Evensong St James, June 2017

Keynote Bible passages: Psalm 84.2, 10, Mark 10.23 – 31

## 1) Mission to India

Before ascending to be with the Father in heaven, Jesus commissioned the apostles to 'go and make disciples of all nations.' First though they were to wait for 'power from on high.' Then came the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. From that time the disciples were impelled to share the gospel message. Peter had first opportunity and note who were present – not only those from the Roman Empire but also from countries beyond the borders. Our special focus tonight is of the *gospel message extending to India*. How did this take place? When we read in Acts 2 of the Spirit's outpouring there's mention of Parthia. In Jesus' day the kingdom of Parthia stretched from Syria to modern day Iraq and Iran across to the western side of India. It is likely there were Jewish communities in that very extensive kingdom and hence their coming to Jerusalem for the feast. It was to Parthia and beyond that Christian tradition holds that the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the message of the gospel. While there is no documentation the early church and 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian writer and leader Eusebius related that Thomas had preached the gospel in India, with many converted and he healed people in the name of Jesus. He was apparently initially reluctant but then was convinced it was God's purpose and in 52AD sailed with a merchant across to the coast of India. Tradition has it that he was martyred at Chennai in 72. He became known as the patron saint of India. Seeds of Christianity were sown and by 200 AD it is recorded there were bishops in north India and missionary activity continued. Because of the influence of the Syrian stream of Christianity the church in India was especially influenced by their liturgical practice and led to the formation of the Mar Thoma church. Note the connection with Thomas. The church continues to exist and there are some 1.6 million members. That might be called the first phase of Christian mission in India.

Thus the gospel came to India. It is a big country – bigger than appears on most maps because of the way it is projected from a round globe onto a flat surface. Also it is very populous – some 1.3 billion which is one-fifth of the world's population. Of that 79% are Hindu, 14% Muslim and 2.3% Christian. When broken down that means there are some 27 million who are Christian.

Protestant Christianity came to India via the Church of England and along with colonial expansion in the 1800's. Initially it was as chaplains to the English communities in the country. Then as evangelists, for Anglicans this was in the CMS (Church Missionary Society) evangelists. In 1816 the CMS also worked with the ancient Syrian church which had survived over the years. Missionaries also went from other European countries and in one city there were numbered some 50,000 members and with a number of young men of Indian race who were evangelists. One historian noted at that time it 'was by far the most remarkable 'younger church' in the non-Roman Christian world'. A further initiative was the mission work with those in the under privileged castes, some one sixth of the population. It is estimated that between 1890 and 1940 a million people were brought into the churches and of that one-fifth were Anglican. Other missionaries worked among the pre-Hindu peoples. And it was recorded the most difficult area was witnessing to high-caste Hindus and Muslims.

One more recent initiative of note was in 1947 with the forming of the ecumenical Church of South India. Some 500,000 Anglicans joined thus united body. Thus it is not surprising that there are some 27 million Christians spread throughout the country. At the International Conference of Order of St Luke here in 2016 an Indian bishop spoke of the work in his diocese, notably among the lower caste and rural peoples. The mind boggles with the numbers compared with our paltry 5 million population in this country, and how many Anglicans.

## 2) Sadhu Sundar Singh.

All this sets the scene for a notable convert to Christianity. Sundar Singh was born in 1889 in Punjab of wealthy parents of the Sikh faith. His mother was deeply religious and instilled in her son a deep devotion to God. She wanted him to become a 'Sadhu' or holy man and he was at first taught by Hindu teachers and then at a Presbyterian mission school. Singh at first was vehemently opposed to Christianity as being a Western intrusion and he burned a copy of the Bible. Then in 1904 he encountered the living Christ in a vision, became a Christian and was baptised on his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, despite his parents opposition. He decided to become a Christian sadhu and started travelling and living by faith travelled round India seeking to present Christianity in a cultural form that would be meaningful to the peoples of his country. In 1909 he was sent by the Anglican bishop to a divinity school. However he left after 7 months declaring it being too restricting and the study was too academic. Singh's conviction was very much of the speaking of the personal Christ which had been his experience.

Singh also sought to bring the gospel to Tibet, which was forbidden – he was thrown into a dry well there and imprisoned. In 1913 he undertook a major fast and in the course of it had another powerful vision of the glorified Christ, thus continuing his mission calling. By 1917 he was known outside India and toured European countries and others bordering India. He made a considerable impression as a modern saint and mystic. After 1922 his health deteriorated and he only made three further visits – to Tibet. It was on the last of these in 1929 he set out but was never heard of again.

## 3) Visions

He wrote a number of books of which I have a copy of one, entitled 'Visions of Sadhu Sundar Singh'. In the Preface he wrote of his soul having passed into the glory of heaven and his spiritual eyes being opened to see the glory of the heavenly sphere, and of conversations with Jesus and angels. He acknowledges that these could have been interpreted as spiritualism but declares what he experienced was of the glory of the spiritual world and experiencing fellowship with the saints. He testified to the reality of the 'communion of saints', which we declare in saying the Creed. Even with these visionary experiences he remained orthodox and his bishop in the Forward likened Singh's experiences to that of St Paul in his near-death experience recorded in 2 Corinthians. Paul was content to leave his deepest spiritual experience without explanation, being 'caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows, being caught up to Paradise and heard things that are not to be told and no mortal is permitted to repeat'.

Singh also links his experiences with the scripture account of Jesus' transfiguration. Bishop LaFroy wrote that for Singh the veil which shrouds the heavenlies was lifted, so he saw our Lord as he really is and that world.

Time doesn't allow to go into the detail of what he described and experienced. I would like to conclude in reading the final paragraph of the Visions as he wrote of all who on dying pass into the spiritual world and to see with their own eyes. 'Before we leave this world forever, to go to our eternal home, we must with the support of God's grace, and in the spirit of prayer, carry out with faithfulness our appointed work. Thus shall we fulfil the purpose of our lives, and enter without any shade of regret, into the eternal joy of the kingdom of our heavenly Father.'

Finally then, Sadhu Sundar Singh, a remarkable person as evangelist mystic and visionary. He was in similar vein to that of Moses, from tonight's first reading, 'the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.' And for us, the collect prayer invites us to a commitment to the gospel, that in the power of the Holy Spirit, we may bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

