

Prayer Letter

January 2010

Dear friends,

The train was full and I was glad that I had reserved a seat. There was no room for my luggage, so with my rucksack on my lap and a bag at my feet I managed; after all this was a fast train and I should be in Chennai in just over two hours.

Waiting at the station to be met I watched as women travellers draped their washing over movable barriers and a group of passengers from the north slept soundly on the floor surrounded by their luggage and, oblivious of the crowds of people milling around them, two male members of the group sat talking and keeping watch.

Once out on the road I soon realised I was in the city again. Chennai is still expanding but with incredible contrasts. Huge shopping malls stand side by side with wayside stalls. Car showrooms and large fashion shops display the affluence in which some live. Blazed across one shop were the words 'fashion is an instinct'. Many of the roads were deeply potholed after the rains and huge piles of rubbish could be seen everywhere. The traffic was a mixture of dilapidated buses packed tight with humanity, posh cars, the occasional bullock cart and numerous auto rickshaws manoeuvring their way in and out of the rest of the traffic; congestion was everywhere. We stopped at traffic lights, which seem to function better than those in Vellore, and I watched as small children selling books tapped on car windows. A limping young woman, carrying a baby, begged while others tried to sell Father Christmas caps with white bobbles. Another small child trying to sell orange t-shirts rushed for safety as the lights changed. We then passed huts set beside filthy water and I found myself asking God why some people have to live out their lives in such squalor.

From Chennai to Bethlehem

We arrived at the church just in time to catch the Nativity Express to Bethlehem. The announcer was calling out in Hindi, Tamil and English that the train would be leaving shortly from platform 1. As we fumbled for our tickets a group of travellers with their guitars were playing carols on the platform. Shekinah (one of our former hostel children)



had scripted this event as an outreach programme for their church. It depicted a journey from Chennai to Bethlehem aboard an Indian train. We all literally travelled from coach to coach. Sound effects accompanied us and we were introduced by our guide to prophecies relating to Jesus' birth, news clippings and short videos. There were interviews with local people about a strange phenomena in the sky over Chennai which we watched on the television. Most people were more interested in shopping bargains! Finally in the last carriage Joseph knocked urgently on the door of this reserved compartment asking for entrance for Mary. This was adamantly refused by the very typical ticket collector telling everyone that such people could not be admitted, however desperate their situation. We arrived at Bethlehem where church members were waiting to answer questions or pray with people if they wished. Finally our journey ended in the 'station restaurant' where we had a meal. Out in the cooler night air the roads had cleared and the journey home was much easier. More than 750 tickets were sold for this event, which sought to bring the message of Christmas to the lives of people in this teeming metropolis.

First year BSc nurses retreat

I think the highlight of November for me was an invitation to take the Saturday sessions at this retreat. With two chaplains and a couple of tutors we left Vellore with 48 students for the Trans World Radio centre set on the coast about three and a half hours journey by coach from here. It was great to be with so many enthusiastic young people again. What followed were

three amazing days which were to prove a blessing to all of us. I hardly knew the chaplains (we have 14 in the hospital) but we soon found that we were very much on the same wavelength. All our sessions seemed to dovetail in the way that only God can organise. We had a lot of fun on the beach besides Bible studies, group work and discussions. Many of the students were still bitterly disappointed not to have been selected for medicine, towards which in India there is still a strong bias. If you do not study medicine or engineering you have not quite 'made it'. Things are slowly changing but by the end of the retreat many had decided that maybe God had a purpose and plan for their lives which they had not considered before.

Balanilayam reunion

For some months a number of the children had been requesting me for another reunion and so it was that as soon as the present children left for the Christmas holidays, 13 young people, former children who had spent many years together, descended on the hostel for two days. It was a great joy to see these now mature young folk again, one or two who had not seen each other for years. Many of course could not come because they were studying or working in the north of the country but it was a great weekend of sharing. We played Pictionary until 11.00pm at night and had Christmas stockings in the lounge, which had always been a tradition. Auntie Ann had of course been preparing favorite desserts and these had to be savoured while meal times extended and everyone seemed to take endless photos on their mobile phones! The only sad occurrence was that the gas gave out on Saturday night necessitating some quick thinking and the use of my own cylinder in the flat... but that is how it is in India and the children were all now grown and able to help. "We must do this again please Auntie" was the request.

The Bangladesh team from Christian Hospital Chandraghona left on 17 December after their six months stay in CMC. We had come to know each other well during that time and it was in some ways sad to see them go. They of course were excited to be returning to their own country and families for Christmas. A new team will arrive this month.

Christmas Eve in Chennai was a special day as Shekinah, her sister and I spent the whole morning shopping for the children of a small orphanage that had no budget for Christmas. Another couple had made a list of the children and a requested gift from each of them... a box of coloured pencils, a pack of cards, a colouring book... all such simple items. We had worked out how much we could spend on each child and some of the requests were added to. There was just

time for a quick cup of coffee and a snack before returning to wrap and label the gifts before we bundled into the car with Jacob and their two children. Buying juice and crisps on the way we found our way through the busy streets to this orphanage of children who had been taken from the streets and now had a roof over their heads and some schooling. Games were played, chocolate cake and ice cream devoured avidly with the items we had brought and Jacob then appeared dressed as Father Christmas. The delight on the faces of those children will be something I shall long remember.

2010: Another year

This year I will be continuing my work at hospital and school. Bible classes and requests to take classes for the students with whom I went away in November have come and also to preach in chapel in February. It seems that God still has work for me here. An invitation to attend the BMS Asia mission workers' retreat came as an unexpected surprise and I have been thinking about the possibility of escaping the intense heat in April and May to visit the UK. Plans are very tentative at present but I trust and know that God will guide in the decisions I need to make.

Lastly I would like to thank so many of you who sent cards and letters at Christmas. With the recession and cost of postage I did not expect to hear from so many but those communications meant so much and were greatly appreciated. May you each know his guidance and presence throughout this year.

Ann

Give thanks:

- ◆ For the blessings of the student retreat.
- ◆ For increasing opportunities for ministry here in CMC.
- ◆ For the joy of all that I was able to share in at Christmas.
- ◆ For the love and affection of 'our' hostel children.

Pray:

- ◆ For physical health and strength for all that God is asking me to do.
- ◆ For wisdom and guidance as I conduct Scripture classes and Bible studies.
- ◆ For meaningful relationships with students, patients and families.
- ◆ For my contact with the new team from Bangladesh.