

EPISTLE ECHOES

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Moments of Faith and Fellowship at St. Thomas I.O.C.



The last quarter of the year has been a very busy time at St Thomas I.O.C. Aberdeen. We celebrated the Feast of St. Thomas and St. Gregorios of Parumala in October. What a memorable weekend it was! We were blessed with the presence of our chief celebrant Rev. Fr Binil Raj from Edinburgh, Rev. Fr. Jebin Pathiraparambil from St. Mary's Syro Malabar Mission in Aberdeen and our Vicar Rev. Fr. Varghese P. A. We kick-started the weekend with an enlightening convention and Evening Prayer on Saturday 26th October. On the Sunday, we partook in the Holy Qurbana followed by Snehavirrunnu and a fun-filled Harvest Festival.

In the same month, eleven of our youth members embarked on a journey to North of Wales to attend the Annual Orthodox Youth Camp organised by our Diocese centred around the topic: "Divine Algorithm – Orthodoxy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence". The weekend brought us closer together as we reflected

on our faith and enjoyed the company of youth across our Diocese. Our Sunday School students were also in for a treat. The annual Orthodox Vacation Bible School (OVBS) was filled with crafts, stories and several fun-filled games this year. Shout out to our Sunday School teachers and Rajesh Achen for making it a very special one indeed!

As part of our Christmas festivities, our enthusiastic carol singers visited our homes to spread the wondrous news of the birth of our Saviour! Our Vicar, Rajesh Achen, blessed us with his presence – the very first time a vicar has been able to join us at carol singing! Since Christmas is a time of giving, our church members contributed non-perishable food items to the local food bank run by the charity "Somebody Cares".

As we look back on 2024 and our previous newsletter editions, this is a powerful testament of everything our church can accomplish when we stand in unity for Christ. We call on each of you to help us continue creating these memories together in Epistle Echoes! Merry Christmas and all the very best wishes for 2025!



Ansu Mari Saji



Finding Ourselves in Genesis: Reflections on Humanity and Faith

As we delve into the Book of Genesis, we are not just encountering ancient narratives but also engaging with profound themes that resonate deeply in our modern lives. This foundational text offers a rich tapestry of stories, exploring creation, humanity, and the complexities of relationships.

Creation and Our Place in the World

Genesis begins with creation. The idea that the universe was intentionally crafted invites us to reflect on our own purpose. The message of goodness at the end of each day of creation serves as a reminder to us to be grateful for the wonder and beauty around us. This prompts me to consider how I can cultivate gratitude in my daily life, recognising that even in chaos, there is an underlying order and beauty waiting to be discovered.

Humanity and Relationships

The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah highlight the intricacies of human relationships. Adam and Eve's journey from innocence to knowledge resonates with the experience of growing up and facing the consequences of our choices. This narrative encourages us to embrace our vulnerabilities and learn from our mistakes. Cain and Abel's story, filled with jealousy and consequence, serves as a reminder of the importance of compassion and understanding in our interactions.

Reflecting on these stories, I find myself considering the dynamics of my own relationships. Are there areas where I can extend forgiveness or seek deeper understanding? Genesis invites us to engage in this self-reflection, reminding us that our connections with others are fundamental to our humanity.

Faith and Doubt

The narrative of Abraham's journey illustrates the tension between faith and doubt. Abraham's willingness to follow a call into the unknown challenges me to confront my own fears about the future. It encourages me to trust in the journey, even when the path is unclear. In a world filled with uncertainty, the faith demonstrated in Genesis inspires a sense of hope and resilience.

Legacy and Continuity

Finally, the themes of legacy and continuity are spread through Genesis. The stories of the patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, speak to the importance of family and the impact of our choices across generations. Reflecting on my own family history, I am reminded of the values and traditions passed down to me. This encourages me to consider how I can contribute positively to my family's legacy, ensuring that love, kindness, and resilience continue to thrive.

Conclusion

Genesis is not merely an ancient text. It is a mirror reflecting our own lives, inviting us to explore our identities, our relationships, and our place in the world. As we reflect on these stories, we find timeless lessons that encourage us to grow, learn, and connect more deeply with ourselves and others. In the spirit of Genesis, may we embrace our journeys with courage and compassion, recognising the heavenly thread woven through our everyday lives.



Chrysal Saji

The Malankara Church: A Historical Overview

The Malankara Church, a key organisation within our Orthodox Malayalee Christian community, has a rich and storied history that reflects both its ancient roots and its evolution through centuries of change. Its origins can be traced back to the arrival of St. Thomas the Apostle in India, who is traditionally credited with establishing the first Christian communities in Kerala. This early foundation laid the groundwork for a thriving Christian presence in the region, which would grow and adapt over the centuries.

During the 19th century, the Malankara Church faced significant challenges, particularly in terms of governance and authority. The British Empire's colonial impact had intensified the existing conflicts within the church leading to a struggle within local leaders and the Patriarch of Antioch. This conflict came to a halt through the split of 1912, which resulted in two separate groups: one that stayed faithful to the Patriarch which is our and another that aimed to create its own identity. This schism was not merely a matter of leadership; it represented deeper issues regarding the local church governance and the maintenance of its traditions.

Hence the establishment of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in 1934 marked a significant turning point in the history of the community. This event allowed the church to develop its own hierarchy, governance structure, and educational institutions. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has since played a major role in promoting education and social reform in Kerala, contributing to the region's economic and social growth whilst maintaining our valuable cultural traditions and heritage.

Today, the Malankara Church continues to be a vital part of the Orthodox Malayalee Christian identity, listing the complexities of modern society while honouring its historical roots. The journey of the Malankara Church highlights the strength and flexibility of our community hence making it a unique and long lasting part of christianity in India.



Diyu Thomas

"The journey of the Malankara Church highlights the strength and flexibility of our community, making it a unique and long-lasting part of Christianity in India."

QUIZ

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| 1. In which Gospel is the story of the Prodigal Son found? | 5. In which Gospel does Jesus turn water into wine? |
| 2. What did Jesus say was the greatest commandment? | 6. What was the profession of Zacchaeus before he met Jesus? |
| 3. Which apostle was known as the "Beloved Disciple"? | 7. What parable did Jesus tell to illustrate the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field? |
| 4. Who was the first person to see the risen Jesus according to the Gospels? | 8. Who was the high priest who condemned Jesus to death? |

Growing in Faith



Faith is the foundation and cornerstone of a Christian's life, and for us, the youth of the Indian (Malankara) Orthodox Syrian Church, the spiritual journey of growing in faith is both a communal and personal endeavour. This festive period, which focuses on the nativity of Jesus Christ, serves as a poignant reminder of God's boundless love and compassion, further deepening our spiritual foundation. For the youth of the Church, this season provides ample opportunities to grow and develop in faith through reflection, worship, and service.

Faith Secured in Tradition

The Indian (Malankara) Orthodox Syrian Church boasts a rich liturgical tradition that provides young people with a pathway to spiritual maturity. This festive season is marked by prayers, fasting, and meditative hymns, encouraging deeper introspection and a closer relationship with God. These moments of reflection help in building a more solid and intimate connection with the Divine. By partaking in the Holy Qurbana, offering confessional prayers, and studying Scripture, the youth can align their lives with the teachings of the Gospel. These practices are not merely routine but a rhythm of grace that nurtures spiritual growth.

Faith in the Community

The Church acts as a nurturing ground where faith is refined collectively. Being part of youth organizations create platforms for young people to study the Scripture, pray together, and challenge one another with new perspectives. Engaging in these forums provides the support and accountability necessary to navigate the challenges of modern life while remaining steadfast in faith.

Faith in Action

Demonstrating faith through action requires living out the Gospel. This season presents unique opportunities for acts of love and compassion. The Church emphasizes the importance of giving and sharing during this special time. Engaging in charitable works, visiting the sick, and reaching out to those in need are small yet impactful ways to experience the transformative power of faith in action.

"As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, we are reminded of God's constant presence with us and His ever-open invitation to grow in His love."

Overcoming Challenges with Faith

In today's world, marked by distractions and scepticism, the younger generation faces significant challenges in maintaining and nurturing their faith. However, the Church equips us to overcome these obstacles through sacraments, mentorship, and inspiration from saints who have walked similar journeys of faith.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, we are reminded of God's constant presence with us and His ever-open invitation to grow in His love. By embracing opportunities for spiritual growth, all members of this Church can ensure their faith becomes a beacon of light in their lives and the world around them.



Lijo Raju



Memories



OCYM Update



Annual Youth Conference Camp 2024: Divine Algorithm – Orthodoxy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

“When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.” – St. John 16:13

The Diocese of UK, Europe, and Africa organized its Annual Youth Conference Camp from October 11–13, 2024, at Mold, North Wales, UK. The theme, “Divine Algorithm: Orthodoxy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence,” encouraged participants to explore the connection between faith and technology.



**Geethu
Hanna John**

The St. Thomas OCYM Aberdeen attended with 11 members, who participated in sessions led by various Achens. Discussions highlighted how Artificial Intelligence, as a human creation, mirrors human characteristics, just as humanity is called to reflect the image of God, its Creator. The sessions were divided by age groups, ensuring deeper engagement with the topic.

In addition to the insightful classes, the camp was filled with fun games and activities that fostered community and strengthened friendships. The conference concluded with an English Holy Qurbana celebrated by H.G. Abraham Mar Stephanos, leaving the attendees spiritually refreshed and inspired to live as faithful stewards in an age of advancing technology.

OVBS 2024: A Time of Spiritual Growth and Fellowship

The IOC Aberdeen Congregation is delighted to share the blessings of our recently held Orthodox Vacation Bible School (OVBS) on December 21st and 22nd, 2024, based on the theme, “Let’s Pray” from St. Luke Chapter 11 Verse 1. The event was beautifully completed with the heartfelt participation of children, the blessings of our Vicar, and the dedicated efforts of OCYM members who actively participated as teachers and facilitators. Their involvement played a crucial role in guiding and nurturing the spiritual growth of our young ones.

As we look forward to the OVBS Closing Ceremony and Holy Qurbana on December 31st, we invite everyone to join us in celebrating the spiritual growth and fellowship we have experienced. May this season of learning and devotion continue to enrich our lives and strengthen our community.



Annual Feast of St. Thomas and St. Gregorios of Parumala

We, the Orthodox Christian Youth Movement (OCYM) of the Indian Orthodox Church Aberdeen, are thrilled to share the joy and blessings from the recently celebrated Annual Feast of St. Thomas and St. Gregorios of Parumala, held on October 26th and 27th, 2024. Our members actively participated in the choir, enriching the Orthodox Convention on the evening of October 26th and the Perunnal Celebration on the morning of October 27th with melodious hymns and spiritual fervor. The event was a beautiful gathering of our parish community, filled with prayer, fellowship, and unity. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who participated and contributed, making this event truly special. May the prayers and intercessions of St. Thomas and St. Gregorios bring blessings and grace to you and your families, guiding and protecting you always.



Supporting Somebody Cares Food Bank



The STIOC Aberdeen Church Community proudly invites you to support the 'Somebody Cares Food Bank'. Join us every 2nd and 4th Sunday of the month at the Great Western Community Centre for our Tea and Coffee Fellowship from 3:30 PM to 5:00 PM, where you can donate non-perishable food items. Additionally, you may enjoy an Indian Curry Box for a voluntary contribution, with all proceeds benefiting the food bank.

We are thrilled to announce that on 29 November 2024, we made our first successful contribution to Somebody Cares, thanks to your generosity! Let's continue making a positive impact by providing much-needed resources to our community. Your kindness and support truly make a difference!

STIOC Aberdeen Christmas Carol Service 2024

We are overjoyed to share the highlights of this year's Aberdeen STIOC Christmas Carol Service, which took place on December 8th and 15th, 2024. The festivities were filled with joyous music, festive cheer, and heartwarming community fellowship. Our very own OCYM members actively participated in the event, enriching the services with their musical talents and enthusiastic spirit. Their contributions played a significant role in making this celebration a memorable and uplifting experience for all. As we celebrated the season of love and hope together, we felt truly blessed to share these moments with our church family. Let's continue to cherish and spread the joy of Christmas throughout our community.



"Together we journey, in faith we grow, as each moment becomes a memory and each memory a blessing."

From the Manger to the Cross: A Reflection on the Mystery of Christ's Birth

The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ is a profound event that captures the paradox of divine humility. The Creator of the cosmos chose to enter His creation, not in splendor, but in the simplicity of a manger. This mystery calls us to ponder the depth of God's love and His divine plan for humanity's salvation. Drawing from the insights of the Church Fathers, such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Ephrem the Syrian, we delve into the Orthodox understanding of this sacred event, its symbolism, and its implications for our lives.



The manger, a common feeding trough for livestock, became the throne for the King of Kings. St. John Chrysostom wonders at this in his Homilies on the Nativity, saying, "He was born in a manger to teach us that no place is unworthy of His presence." This humility reverses human assumptions about power and majesty. The Lord's birth in a stable demonstrates that he came not to reign over us but to be one of us, to really share the fullness of our human condition.

St. Ephrem the Syrian poetically captures this paradox: "*Blessed is He who descended to dwell in the womb and in the manger; Blessed is He who embraced both the heights and the depths.*" This image reminds us that Christ's incarnation sanctifies all aspects of life, from the womb to the manger, and ultimately to the cross.

"Blessed is He who descended to dwell in the womb and in the manger; Blessed is He who embraced both the heights and the depths."

The Nativity story also emphasizes the universality of Christ's mission. The humble and marginalized shepherds were the recipients of the angelic announcement. The Magi from the east, in contrast, represent the wise of the world, from nations beyond the tribe of Israel, who came in search of the truth.

St. John Chrysostom reflects on this unity in Christ: "The shepherds and the Magi stand together, for Christ has broken the barriers of division, uniting the simple and the wise in one faith." This union calls us to transcend social and cultural barriers, embracing the Church as the body of Christ, where all are equal before God.

The Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, plays a central role in the Nativity. Her "yes" to God's plan restored the disobedience of Eve, imparting life where there had been death. St. Ephrem so beautifully exhorts her in his hymns saying:

"The Lord entered her womb and clothed Himself in humanity; The Virgin became the gate through which salvation entered the world."

In Orthodox tradition, the Theotokos, or Godbearer, serves as the ultimate model of faith, humility, and obedience. We see here that God works through those who surrender to Him, no matter how unassuming. The manger is not just a symbol of Christ's humility; it is a glimpse of His sacrificial end. Just as He was laid into the wood of the manger, He would later be hung on the wood of the cross. The swaddling clothes in which He is wrapped at birth foreshadow the burial linens that will cover Him after His crucifixion.

St. Ephrem draws this connection: *"In the manger, He lay as one poor; On the cross, He stretched out His hands to enrich all creation."* The Nativity and the Passion are inseparably linked, showing that Christ's mission was to offer Himself as a ransom for many.

As we celebrate the Nativity, the Church invites us not simply to celebrate an event but to enter into the reality of that event. St. John Chrysostom encourages us: *"If Christ humbled Himself for our sake, how can we not be humble? And if He has made Himself poor, how can we hold on to riches?"* This feast calls us to live out the humility, love, and self-offering of our Lord.

St. Ephrem reminds us of our role as witnesses to this mystery: *"Let us become the manger, receiving the Bread of Life; Let us become the star, guiding others to Christ."*

The journey from the manger to the cross is the heart of the Gospel—the story of God's infinite love for His creation. Through the words of St. John Chrysostom and St. Ephrem the Syrian, we glimpse the depth of this mystery and are called to reflect it in our own lives. As we stand before the icon of the Nativity this season, may we rejoice in the humility of Christ, marvel at His love, and commit ourselves to live as faithful witnesses of His light in a darkened world.



Melvin Philip



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Balancing Tradition and Faith During Christmas

Christmas, a season of joy and festivity, holds a central place in the hearts of millions around the world. However, the modern-day celebrations often reflect a complex interplay between religious tradition and contemporary practices as the essence of Christmas, which is rooted in the biblical narrative, can become turbulent amidst societal shifts. So how can we reconnect with the spiritual core of Christmas?



Megha Jacob

At its heart, Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, as recounted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The nativity story, rich with humility and wonder, reveals the profound mystery of God becoming man. The angel's announcement to the shepherds, "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10), emphasizes the universal significance of Christ's birth. This declaration serves as a reminder that the message of Christmas transcends time and place.

Modern-day Christmas, however, has evolved significantly from its biblical roots. Today, it is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a religious celebration. The influence of commercialization has redefined Christmas for many, shifting the focus from spiritual reflection to consumerism. The bustling shopping centres, sparkling lights, and an abundance of gifts can often overshadow the manger scene in Bethlehem. While these elements create an atmosphere of excitement, they risk diverting attention from the core message of hope and redemption that Christmas represents.

"Among the glittering decorations and joyous carols, the nativity remains a quiet yet powerful reminder of God's love."

Yet, this blend of tradition and modernity does not necessarily diminish the holiday's spiritual significance. For Christians, it provides an opportunity to integrate faith into social practices. The Apostle Paul's statement, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31), serves as a guiding principle. Even amidst the festivities, believers can honour Christ by embodying generosity, love, and gratitude—values which are deeply ingrained in the nativity story.

Family gatherings, a highlight of Christmas, echo the relational aspect of Jesus's ministry. His birth was not just a solitary event but a moment that brought people together including shepherds, wise men and a holy family. Similarly, modern families reunite during Christmas to share meals, exchange stories, and create memories. These interactions can serve as reflections of the communal love described in Scripture, reminding us of the bonds that sustain us.

Moreover, acts of kindness, a significant part of contemporary Christmas traditions, align with the biblical call to love our neighbours. The wise men's gifts to baby Jesus (Matthew 2:11) inspire us to give, not only material presents, but also our time, compassion, and presence. Supporting charitable causes, visiting the lonely, or offering comfort to the grieving reflects the spirit of Christ, who came "to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

In conclusion, Christmas in modern times invites a dual reflection: celebrating with cultural expressions while returning to the profound truths of the Scripture. Among the glittering decorations and joyous carols, the nativity remains a quiet yet powerful reminder of God's love. As we navigate this blend of old and new, let us remember the angel's words: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests" (Luke 2:14). This Christmas, may our hearts and homes reflect this peace, embracing both tradition and the timeless message of faith. Merry Christmas!



OUR CHURCH FACTS

The Mar Thoma Sleeva, also known as the Saint Thomas Cross or Perisan Cross, connects the Indian Orthodox Church and Persia. The Mar Thoma Sleeva is located in many churches across India. Unlike in other traditions, our cross does not show crucified Christ. The bare cross signifies the empty tomb glorifying the Resurrection of Christ.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- The next issue of our Newsletter will be released on Sunday 20th April 2025. Please submit any articles, reflections, artwork and other achievements to our editorial team.
- Nineveh Fast will be observed from February 10th - 12th 2025. This is a three-day period of fasting and repentance commemorating Prophet Jonah's three days in the belly of a fish and also the repentance of the city of Nineveh.
- Great Lent will be observed for 50 days starting on March 3rd 2025 ending on Easter Sunday celebrating the Resurrection of Christ. The three pillars of the Great Lent include fasting, praying and almsgiving.



Prayer Corner

"O Lord Jesus Christ, do not close the door of Your mercy in our faces.

We confess that we are sinners, have mercy upon us. O Lord, Your love made you descend to us from Your place, that by Your death our death might be abolished. Have mercy upon us. Amin.