

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

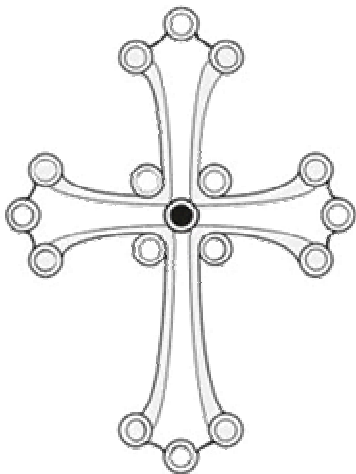
August 4

Keeping step with the past

I belong to the Chaldean Church, one of the most ancient in the Middle East, going back to the dawn of Christianity. It is also the church of the majority of Christians in Iraq, where I was born.

Our tradition is that St. Thomas the Apostle preached the Gospel in Mesopotamia, Persia and India. The church flourished notably in the 9th and 10th centuries when it sent missionaries as far as China. However, countless persecutions have now reduced the Christian community in Iraq to a mere 2% of the population.

Here in Britain there are some 1000 Chaldean families, living mainly in the London area, where we have a priest. But we can worship at any local Catholic church because, although the majority of Eastern Christians are Orthodox, we are “Uniates”, i.e. united with the Pope in Rome. Due to recent large-scale emigration from Iraq, Chaldeans can now be found in most parts of the world.



We take pride in our old rituals, customs, feasts, fasts and the patriarchal system. Our liturgy is probably the oldest in the universal church. It retains primitive elements of worship that we inherited from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, and the language we use is Aramaic, which Jesus himself spoke.

The challenge for us Chaldeans living in the West is to preserve our faith and its precious culture. It's a dilemma we have in common with all religious and ethnic minorities here. Rather than quarrelling, we should be comparing notes.

Dr. Joseph Seferta is a retired teacher of religion who has lived in Birmingham for 34 years. He is the Birmingham Churches Together representative on Birmingham Council of Faiths. *Pictured above is the Chaldean form of the Christian emblem.*

August 11

A death in the family

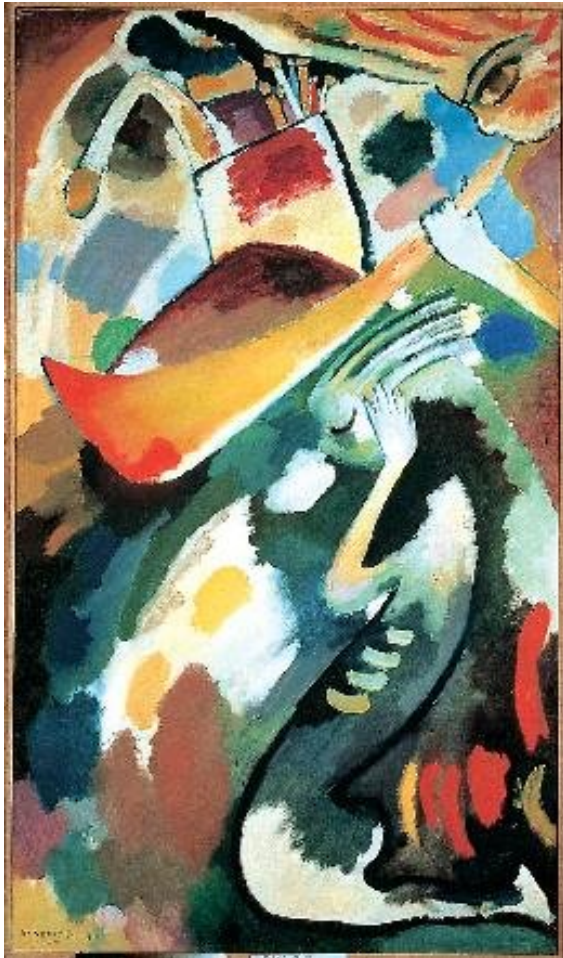
I was very moved by an article written by a woman who had lost a child in a 'cot death' incident. She said that the most effective help she had received in dealing with her grief was from a colleague at work. This woman seemed able to say exactly the right thing. Contact by phone continued even after her colleague left and moved to another job. As time went on and the woman's grief lessened, her correspondent declined suggested meetings and contact gradually ceased.

So she was shocked to see the death of this helpful colleague announced in the press and, on contacting her family, was horrified to hear that she had been depressed and had taken her own life. The ongoing calls must have been cries for reciprocal help to which she had been deaf! The guilt!

This article made me wonder how often I fail to be sufficiently sensitive to the needs of those around me, whether in work, church, the neighbourhood or family.

Jesus said that when we help one another he sees it as helping him. In his story of the sheep and the goats he blessed those who had helped him in hunger, thirst, loneliness

and illness. They had no recall of ministering to him in this way and he had to explain, 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' The lesson is that in the community of need we all belong to one family.



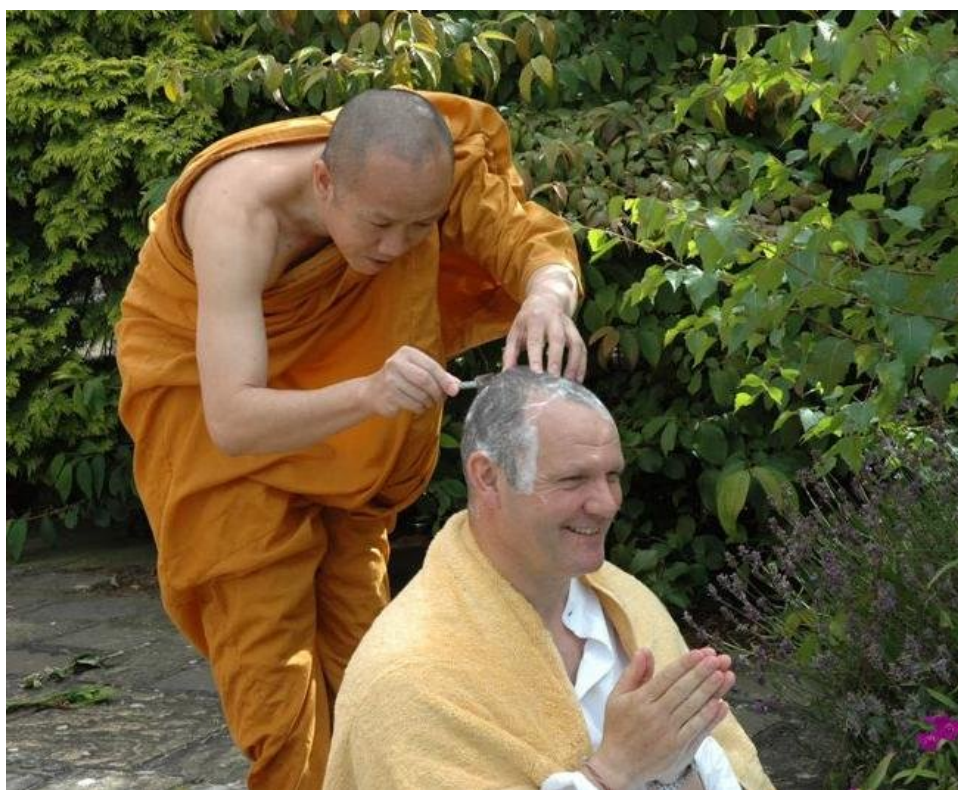
Geoff Purkis was born in Moseley, and now lives in Edgbaston. He worked for Rover from 1964 until 2001. He is a member of the West Birmingham Christadelphian Church in Quinton and works for several of their charities. The illustration is a 1910 painting of the last judgement by Wassily Kandinsky

August 18

Reflections on Renunciation

For nine days at the start of August, I undertook novice monastic ordination at the Buddhavihara Temple near Kings Bromley. The Thai abbot there holds that to understand the nuances of the Buddhist life it is beneficial for those of us who are serious about our faith to undergo the process.

As a Buddhist for nearly twenty years, the emphasis on disciplining the senses through meditative experience is fundamental to my practice. And not only mine - Christians, Hindus, Cabbalistic Jews, Sufis, Zoroastrians and Jains all have meditations within their respective traditions, and nearly all



practice in ways that reduce sensory activity to create clarity of mind. There may well be a variety of motivating factors, but it is fair to assess that the end result – inner peace – is the aspiration of most.

My recent experience took on a more significant role, not only as meditator, but also as a renunciant. Despite the short time, the effect was profound, allowing my mind to work at a level that would otherwise be difficult to achieve without the intensity of a monastic day, which starts with the waking bell at five in the morning and concludes with the sleeping bell at 10 p.m.

Those who have been on retreats will know that it can help train the mind to deal with the anxieties of everyday experience, but I have to confess to having some difficulty adjusting back to the pace of life. I don't think I have ever found it quite so hard!

*Formerly a Police Officer, **Phil Henry** is the Buddhavihara's Treasurer. He is also Buddhist Faith Adviser at the University of Derby and finishing a doctoral thesis on 'Socially Engaged Buddhism in the UK' at Liverpool University. The novitiate to which he refers was reported in the Birmingham Post last week.*

‘The ocean is the same as it has been of old
The events of today are its waves and its rivers’
Sayyid Haydar Amuli (14th Century)

Recently I was invited to a women’s interfaith event in Leeds. As I approached the Thackray Museum where the event was based, the atmosphere was full of life, I could feel the spirituality of young and old. There were women from all walks of life, cultures, faiths; this is what made it fascinating. A united network of women who had more things in common than you could imagine. The stories I heard had a similar element, women discussing juggling of home life, work life, children, husbands, family and friendships.

The day was split into a number of workshops. Stephen Lawrence’s mum talked about the loss of her son and how her faith helped her. This story touched all the women, whether parents or not. Children have that influence on people, as life is a precious gift, bestowed upon us all by the heavenly creator of the world. Jayanti was another wonderful speaker, very calm as she shared some of her experiences of discrimination, starting at home first, where her brother was allowed to play while she had to wash up. Normally racism is associated with hatred for another faith or culture. Seeing its root in any form of discrimination really put a twist on things.

From the day I learnt that we are all people of one race, which is the human race. Women especially have strong instincts and, no matter what their faith, can discuss issues of common concern with others all over the globe. It is they who keep things going silently.

***Nazneen Amin** is Community Cohesion Policy Support Officer at the Government Office for the West Midlands and a member of the ‘Women in Faith’ Network. Birmingham-born, she attends the Gomkal Shariff mosque in Small Heath which, she says, has excellent provision for women.*

