

SACRED SANCTUARY OF SOLACE

By Dishan Joseph

In the Old Testament of the Holy Bible there is a story of King Solo-

mon, aspiring to build a tabernacle for the people of Israel. Perhaps it was this same desire that strongly captivated Warden Stone and Warden Mc-

Pherson, as they envisaged to "build a house for Gods children" at S. Thomas' College, Mt.Lavinia. When the school was originally built at Mutwal in 1851,

the Christ Church Cathedral or Gal Palliya as it was known was the seat of the presiding Bishop of Colombo (before the magnificent Cathedral of Christ was constructed at Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo-7). In 1921 when Warden Stone left for England on holiday, the Rev. G.M Withers went to work organizing a campaign to raise funds for the building of the college chapel at Mount Lavinia. He is said to have faithfully gone around many parts of Ceylon on his battered motor cycle. The architect was P.A. Adams, who designed the chapel to be 130 feet long and 39 feet wide, large enough to accommodate 500 boys. In 1923 the foundation stone was laid by Rt. Rev. Earnest Arthur Copleston, Bishop of Colombo. On 13 February 1927, the Bishop of Colombo Rt. Rev. Mark Carpenter-Garnier blessed and consecrated the Chapel of the Transfiguration at STC.

This glorious edifice has become the most iconic landmark of the entire school. Her bold Byzantine style exterior of stone resonates the simplicity and humility which is imparted to us in the Bible. The letters AMDG 9Latin Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam are carved on the wall over the west door. The chapel has been a place of solace and restoration for thousands of students who have been blessed to enter her precincts. Behind the altar of Italian marble one can witness the inspiring painting of the Transfiguration, painted in the 1968 by David Paynter (the mural celebrates its 50 years). It is believed that the prudent Warden at that time Rev. John Selvaratnam had given this idea to the artist. The beautiful manifestation of Christ with Elijah and Moses is stunning. It reminds us that form the "mountain top" experience; we have to go back to the valley to live with our fellow men, continuing the rhythm of the transfiguration within us. Perhaps the most unique feature of this mural is that wherever you stand inside the chapel and gaze on the face of Christ, it seems that his radiant eyes are looking at you.

Perhaps this is why the founder

Bishop Chapman said in 1849" May it be our care to provide, under the guidance of Gods Holy Spirit, that all that is taught here may rest upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone". A chapel is not complete without voices singing to venerate and glorify Almighty God: this is where the Thomian Choir has displayed their harmonious prowess for a century. The choir has been a vital part of the worship at the Chapel of the Transfiguration (The Thomian Choir sang for the first time on 21 September 1854 at the dedication of the Christ Church Cathedral). At Mount Lavinia since 1927 from the time of Organist and Choirmaster Rev.Gilbert the choral tradition was firmly established. The boys were trained and mentored by Rev. Roy Yin, Lucien Nethasinghe, Rev.Lucien Fernando and Russel Bartholomeuse. It is recorded that in 1938 the chapel was bestowed with a Hammond organ by the Sir Stewart Schneider trust.

I spoke to Rev. Marc Billimoria, present Warden STC, who explained "As the College celebrates 100 years at Mount Lavinia this year we are mindful that for 90 of those 100 years the Chapel of the Transfiguration has played a crucial role in the life of the College and in the lives of Thomians. The prudent priest also added "The style of our worship which is liturgical and sacramental within the Anglo-Catholic tradition of Anglicanism that places much emphasis on ritual and ceremonial that we believe adds to the awe of worship. There are but a handful of Anglican places of worship in Sri Lanka today that maintain this particular type of worship. It is the offering up of something beautiful and



Rev. Marc Billimoria, Warden, S. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia

fragrant to God who alone must be the focus of our worship. Taking about his entry to the Christian ministry Rev. Billimoria said "Many of us who have entered the ordained ministry in the Anglican Church were either led to faith or nurtured in our faith and challenged by God to serve within this Chapel through the ministries of a number of eminent Chaplains who inspired us. One of them, a guru for many of us, Bishop Duleep de Chickera, has said: "The Chapel has always stood on the central high point of S. Thomas' College. My hope is that it will continue to be the focus of the spiritual and moral life of the school and continue to inspire future generations."

The annual Christmas service of Nine Lessons and carols has deeply impacted my own life for the past three decades. This is one event in the college calendar that draws old boys from across the globe. The college chapel has been an effective beacon of hope, spiritually illuminating the minds of generations. Esto Perpetua.



The mural inside celebrates 50 years this year (Painted 1968)