



Reflections

Greeting the Tamil way

SIGNIFICANT information is emerging almost every day from the medical and scientific community about the killer virus Covid-19, though a cure and a vaccine seem to be far off.

Countries are copying coping and containment strategies from each other; contact tracing is the latest approach that we in UK have learned from countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong and Germany who have been successfully using this for a while.

It is a relief to notice the relatively slow and the non-linear progression of the infection and death toll of the virus within our region compared with other areas. Long-term lockdown is

predicted to have a devastating impact on our economy and our well-being. Therefore, there is a pressing need to ease the lockdown, even if not fully, then at least in stages, depending upon the spread of the virus.

However, there is a strong medical prediction that for some time we may not be able to greet our family, friends and acquaintances in the usual way with handshakes, hugs and kisses.

Covid-19 is understood to be a social virus and as likely to spread by touch as coughing or sneezing. We are used to expressing care, warmth and interest in each other through touch.

The feeling of warm touch increases the level of oxytocin

in the brain; this is involved in strengthening social bonds and trust in relationships.

At the face of this precarious contagion we are left with no choice other than to invent or copy a new way to meet and greet people.

As all our church services are now online with Zoom, FaceTime and Skype, I seem to have adopted a Tamil way of greeting people with Vanakam (Hello in Tamil); this is similar to Namaste in Hindi.

For those who are interested, Tamil is a classical language and has a very ancient and independent tradition, with a considerable body of ancient literature. The most revered ancient text (from 300 BCE) is Tirukkural, which has been

translated into at least 42 world languages, with about 57 different renderings in the English language alone. Leo Tolstoy held it in high esteem for its universality and secular nature.

A Tamil's way of greeting is usually done by uttering the word Vanakam while holding both hands with palms and fingers gently pushed against each other (as shown in the picture left).

'Vana' means 'vanangu' (worship) and 'ak' represents the Tamil alphabet 'அ' meaning human eyes along with the third eye-God.

When spoken Vanakam with the hand posture as mentioned above, it is believed that the person is greeted as a sign of respect for being the person he/

she is, as well as an acknowledgement of God's presence within that person. In many ways it is a spiritual greeting not confined to any religion.

In the upcoming new normal scenario, we may not be able to shake hands, hug or kiss each other for a while, but we certainly can greet each other with Vanakam both on and offline. This word may not have the power to increase the level of oxytocin but will certainly boost the other happy neurotransmitters — dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins.

Vanakam to you all.
Darline Joseph Marianathan.
St. Boniface Okehampton & Holy Family Chagford.