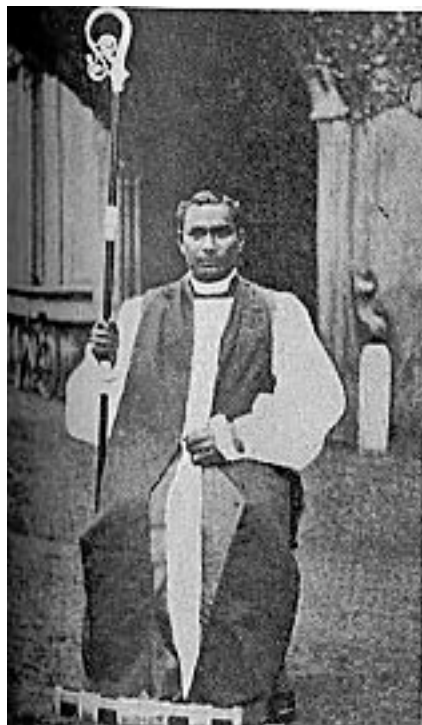


Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah, 1st Indigenous Anglican Bishop in India, 1874 - 1945

Observed 2 January



The Anglican Church came to India with the British Empire and was for a long time characterized by a consistently European style in all that it did and by only English Bishops and priests in positions of leadership. The church spread everywhere that the imperial influence spread, and native men were raised up to be priests (although they were expected to be subservient to the white leadership). V.S. Azariah was the son of an Indian Anglican priest and a very devoted Christian mother.

His life entirely overlaps that of Mohandes K. Gandhi, since he was born five years later and died three years sooner. Like Gandhi, he understood the need for genuine independence for the Indian people in all aspects of life. He saw the shortcomings of having an entirely foreign leadership in the church.

Azariah himself became a YMCA evangelist at age 19 and became secretary of the YMCA for all of South India while still in his 20s. In this capacity he traveled extensively in Europe and America, while also spearheading the training of large numbers of native Indian evangelists and teachers. When he was 35 he was ordained an Anglican priest. Just a few years later in 1912 the Diocese of Dornkal was created and he was ordained its first bishop, the first native Indian to be ordained an Anglican bishop. This ordination took place at Saint George's cathedral in Calcutta, with more than ten English bishops joining in the consecration and crowds of supporters in attendance. It was a crucial moment in the growth of a strong Indian Christianity.

Bishop Azariah had long realized that the competition among the various branches of the Church was hampering the spread of the Gospel and had a vision of a united church. This vision bore fruition just two years after his death in the formation of the Church of South India, which was formed by joining the Anglican Church of South India with a number of protestant groups, large and small (including Presbyterians, Baptist, Lutheran, Congregational, Reformed, and Methodist churches.) The Church of South India follows basic Anglican principals of tradition and organization and is today the second largest church in India (after the Roman Catholic.)

Bishop Azariah was an inspiration to missionaries like Roland Allen whose writings about mission work in India and China continue to influence the development of the church in our own place and time.

Lessons Sirach 4:1-12, Psalm 37:23-31; Acts 14:21-27; Luke 9:46-50

Collect - Emmanuel, God with us, making your home in every culture and community on earth: We thank you for raising up your servant Samuel Azariah as the first indigenous bishop in India. Grant that we may be strengthened by his witness to your love without concern for class or caste, and by his labors for the unity of the Church in India, that people of many languages and cultures might with one voice give you glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.