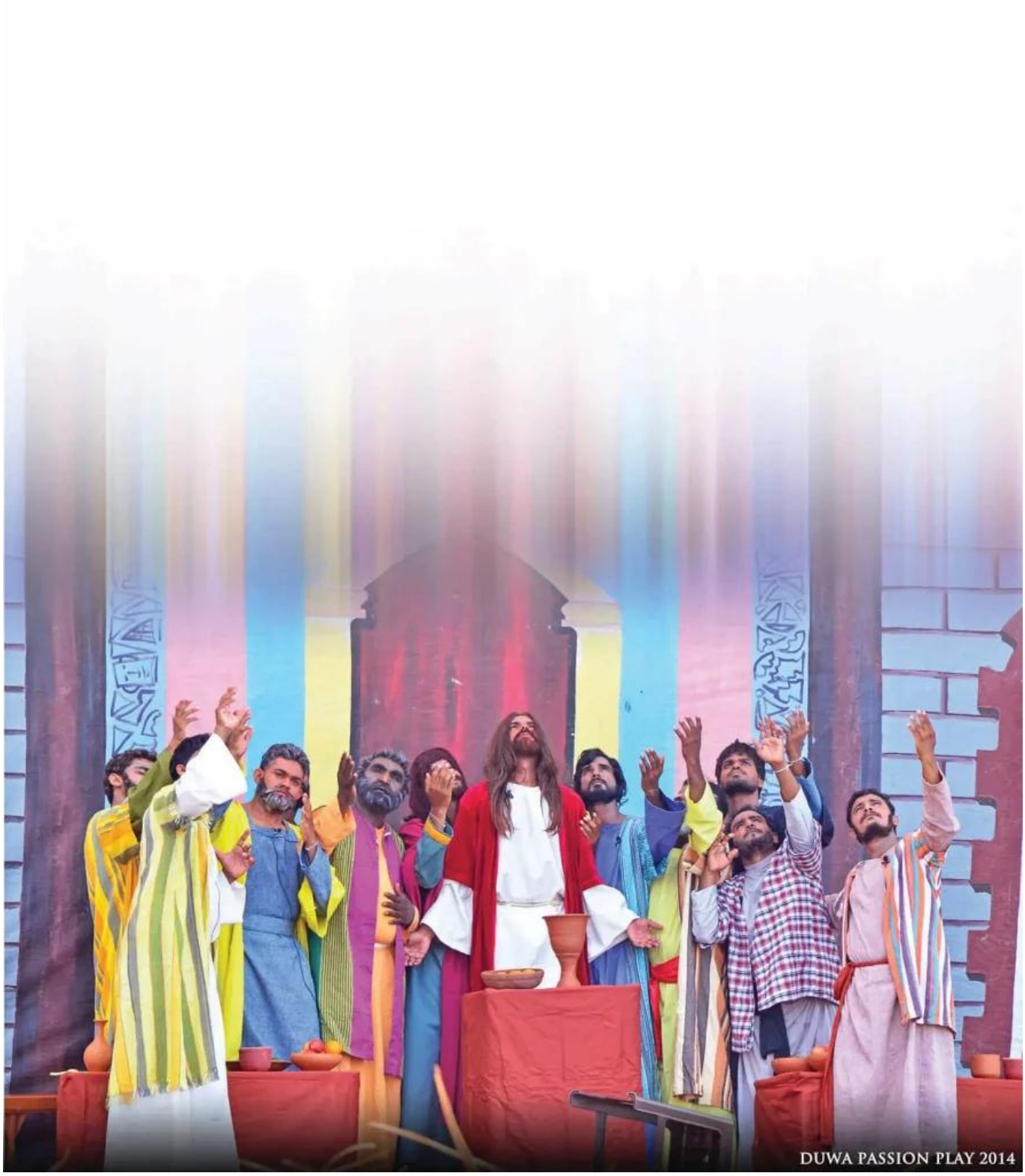
THE PASSION PLAY OF DUWA AND THE MAGNIFICENT STATUE OF JESUS CHRIST

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DUWA PASSION PLAY 2014

The Church of Our Lady of Good Voyage in Duwa, Negombo stands as a sentinel of protection for fishermen. Within its confines lies the statue of Jesus Christ that had been specially commissioned by the people of Duwa in the 19th Century from Cochin, India. This Church is especially famed for the yearly 'Pasku' (in Sinhala) or Passion Play on Good Friday, which displays this magnificent statue of Jesus Christ.

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In the beginning, the Church of Our Lady of Good Voyage had been a structure with a roof thatched with coconut leaves. With time the Church had been developed to the beautiful building we see today, that was built in 1894 during the time of Fr M J Laplace. However, the history of the Church and the performance of the Passion Play dates back centuries.

Said to have been performed for over 400 years, the first Passion Play had been showcased in 1728 with a script developed by Fr Jacome Gonzalvez based on the 'Nine sermons' in the Dukprapthi Prasangaya. Puppets and statues were used to narrate the story of the Passion, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. As the years passed, the people of Duwa wished to have a statue of Jesus Christ for the annual pageant.



The fishermen of Duwa were known to travel to Cochin, India in their catamarans with goods laden for trade. And, on one such journey three brothers – Mihindukulasuriya Pedro Fernando, Mihindukulasuriya Domingo Fernando as well as Mihindukulasuriya Juan Fernando approached the great master sculptor Jokeenu

Maistri to make a statue of Christ for the Duwa Passion Play. Time passed, and the people of Duwa were impatient to bring the statue to Duwa and were urging the great sculptor to finish the statue. In the season of Lent in 1838, a group from Duwa sailed to Cochin to bring back the statue of Christ. The statue had been just painted thus, the Jokeenu Maistri had advised them to stay another week so that the paint would completely dry. However, the group was impatient and thus, the statue was prepared for voyage. As the great sculptor could not travel himself, he sent his most senior student to accompany the statue to Duwa.

Upon arrival in Duwa in 1839, the people welcomed the statue with great ceremony. However, once they opened the box and removed the cloth, they were upset to see that the paint had been smudged. As the great sculptor's student had traveled to Duwa, he immediately requested the people to bring about 70 gold coins. These coins were rubbed on a stone until they became a fine powder, which was then used to make the required paint to be applied on the statue. To this day, the statue of Jesus Christ in Duwa has a gold tinge that glistens in the sun. The statue of Jesus Christ is displayed to the public on the first Friday of every month.

The great statue of Jesus Christ became the highlight of the Duwa Passion Play, which continued to use puppets and statues for the perfor- mance. It was in 1939, the Priest of the Parish, Fr Marcelline Jayakody decided to do the Passion Play based on the book, 'Born to be King' with real-life actors. In the 1970's, human actors were introduced even for Christ.

The Duwa Passion Play has become a production of about 200 people, with beautiful and elaborate costumes and make-up artists that create a mesmerizing performance. The play is per- formed on the massive platform known as the 'Pasku Maduwa'. The grand finale is the unveiling of the magnificent statue of Jesus Christ on the crucifix. Hundreds of people from around the country come to witness the Duwa Passion Play, and many even arrive in boats taking the sea route to witness this



massive production. Starting from 12 noon on Good Friday, the Passion Play is performed till late evening and, it is a day dedicated to spirituality and prayers.

The Passion Play of Duwa begins with songs of lament described in Sinhala as ‘Pasan Geethika’, which are soulful renditions that describe the looming suffering and death of Jesus in song. The prelude to the Passion Play begins with scenes from the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve, the first human creations of God fall from their Creator’s favor by descending into sin.



Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a colt is another poignant display, where the glory moment that he enjoyed briefly from a crowd that would later call to crucify him before Pontius Pilate is played out with pomp and pageantry. The actors representing the Jewish people lay their clothes on the ground to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem as they shout “King of Israel”.

Among the most passionate scenes of the Play is Jesus’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, where He, accompanied by Peter, James and John, breaks down before God, a heartbreaking moment that skillfully portrays the fragile human nature in the face of suffering. All the while Jesus’ most trusted disciples lay asleep oblivious to their Teacher’s pain and fear of the impending agony. Then enters Judas, accompanied by the High priests, the scribes and soldiers to deliver the historic ‘kiss of betrayal’, yet another agonizing display in the Duwa Passion Play.

Jesus, as described in the Gospels is led into trial, first before Annas, the former High Priest, then taken to the house of Caiaphas, where he endures a night of horrific abuse and beating.

The Passion Play also displays the scene where Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, asks Jesus, “Are you the king of Jews? while the crowds in the background shouted crucify him. Thereafter, the Way of the Cross is performed in the Passion Play with the grand finale being the unveiling of the magnificent statue of Jesus Christ on the Cross displaying the Crucifixion.

These are not mere scenes that are acted out by the villagers of Duwa; they are moments from history that people prepare to relive with great piety as well as depth. The entire story is about giving life to every character, where the actors are able to convey the complexity of behaviors to the audience.

There is a tradition of the people of Duwa, where the statue of Jesus Christ is kept at the Church of Our Lady of Good Voyage in Duwa for two years, and on the third year it is taken to St Peter’s Church in Negombo. This is because members of the community married and settled in Negombo and they too had requested for the statue to be availed to them for worship. However, the Passion Play, is held only in Duwa. This year, the statue of Jesus Christ was taken to St Peter’s Church in a special ceremony in the month of February.

The whole ethos of the Duwa Passion Play transcends beyond reliv- ing years of tradition; it is an attempt to remind believers of the profundity of a selfless act that even today is significant for its redemptive message. The Passion Play of Duwa is a much look forward to event in the calendar. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Passion Play will not be held this year. Yet, in the future it is hoped that the Passion Play of Duwa is resumed for posterity.

Information provided by: Abdon Mihindukula, Parishioner, The Church of Our Lady of Good Voyage, Duwa.



The magnificient statue of Jesus Christ that was specially commissioned for the people of Duwa from Cochin, India.









Scenes from the Duwa Passion Play.





The fishermen always worship the statue of Our Lady of Good Voyage to seek blessings and protection for a good journey and return.