

**In the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem
St Saviour's Church, Akko
Re-dedication Service 21st February 2017**

**Sermon by The Most Reverend Suheil Dawani,
Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem**

We are overwhelmed this evening with happiness, gladness, and gratitude, as we witness the rededication of St Saviour's Church, in Acre. The revival of this church and its activities will be for the glory of God and the Ministry of humanity. It will be a beacon of hope and faith, enabling values of goodness, love, and forgiveness through the ministry of the living stones to the community.

This evening we, the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, with our sister churches, and the people in Acre, although we are from different backgrounds and affiliations, unite together to celebrate this important and historic event of rededication of this spiritual place after so many years of waiting. God has empowered us to revive God's house of prayer, and to re-open it as a space of welcome to all people without exception.

This service of rededication comes after we re-opened and re-dedicated St. Paul's Church in West Jerusalem in 2011 – which closed in 1948, and with the help of God, we will begin the renovation of St. Peter's Church in Jaffa-Tel Aviv, which was also closed in 1948. We hope we will re-dedicate St Peter's in the near future.

The ancient city of Acre expanded at the beginning of the 20th century to a population of around 9000 people; the city had six Mosques and five churches. During the British Mandate people started building their homes outside the city walls, yet following the 1948 war the people were moved back to the old city.

Christianity has flourished in this city since the second century and remained Christian in character until the Arab invasion and the fall of the Byzantine army in 638 AD. The Arabs removed the Greek name of the city and restore its original name Akka or Akko in Aramaic. During the Crusader period the city of Acre became an important fortress and harbour.

The Anglican ministry was started in Acre by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) when a new school for boys was opened in 1874 and later a school for girls in 1887, the two schools were merged into one school in 1893.

On 24th January 1886, the first church committee meeting was held to elect a Pastorate Committee. The church's ministry included education, healthcare, and rehabilitation, especially among the needy. English lessons were held and there was regular Bible Study.

As for the medical ministry, a small clinic was developed to a small hospital in the old city. Ten years later the hospital was closed and later the school as well.

At the beginning of the 1940s the Pastorate Committee bought a piece of land in order to build a new church building with the help of parishioners and their generosity.

The foundation stone was laid in August 1946 in the presence of Archdeacon Campbell MacInnes and Najib Qubin, Chairman of the Church Council at the time. Revd Butros Salameh was assigned to be a Vicar at Acre. The church building was ready for use by January 1947, and on the 14th 1947 Bishop Henry Stewart lead the service of dedication.

After the war of 1948 the majority of the parishioners at Saint Saviour's left the city. The church was used for a while before it was closed and has remained closed, until this day on which we have come to rededicate it and revive its ministry.

As we gather for this re-dedication, we recall that when Jesus ascended into heaven he sent the Holy Spirit to enable the church to continue God's work of salvation. The present and future mission of St Saviour's must be put in action through the work of the Holy Spirit. This mission entrusted to us through grace is to live and enact Christ's message of justice, truth, peace, and reconciliation. It is the same Holy Spirit which led the prophets of old to stand for the truth, to protect the oppressed, to reproach the oppressor, and to be a prophetic voice in all the world, will lead this church today to all that is true and just.

Our present and future theological thinking in the Holy Land lies in understanding that there is resurrection after death, light after darkness, and hope after sadness. If the church of today does not carry this message of the resurrection and hope then our ministry is in vain. Our land needs the spirit of the resurrection and hope, and any theological thinking that does not present hope for our people in the Holy Land will not be a theology either for the present time or for the future.

Our theology in life is shared with others through the ministry of our parishes and institutions, whether it is educational, medical, or rehabilitation. It is through healing and teaching that people come to know and realize the love of God given to us in the person of Jesus Christ, the

Good Shepherd, the teacher, and the healer. This is indeed a living witness to Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Therefore, our Christian theology invites us - even though we are diverse in worship, liturgy and theological thinking - to be one body in Christ Jesus. We are to reach out to those other religions, Muslims and Jews. We do not claim that we have no differences: on the contrary, it is natural to have this kind of diversity. We share in worshiping the one living God and our conviviality for the sake of true humanity which leads us to goodness, security, justice, peace, and prosperity for all.

One of the basic needs that all world strives for today - especially here in the Middle East which suffers so much through war, violence and extremism - is for a real peace that restores true humanity. The spectrum of the tragedy and the bitterness of suffering causes people to fear what the future will hold for them. There is a dire need for a new education that teaches people to respect life and to perceive the human person to be of a sacred value because we are all created in the image and likeness of God. This new education will provide healing to the wounds of our bleeding humanity and restore relationships of broken societies. History has proved that war breeds war, violence breeds violence; yet we know too that peace can bring peace.

Reviving the ministry of this church and its activities is to engage, share, and join together in God's mission in the world. We are to be bridge builders for love and mutual understanding. We are to strengthen the bonds of unity. We are to live together among the different monotheistic religions to the glory of God and service of humanity.

In our reading this evening from the Gospel of St John, Jesus says: "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Our responsibility in Ministry is to be seen as service and not authority. The good Shepherd takes care of the sheep and protects them. This is the kind of ministry and responsibility that all Christians should share; in ministry there is no control or boasting, but humble service.

We cannot perform this ministry unless we make the love of Jesus as our cornerstone. Jesus' love allowed Peter to carry his service and ministry to others. The love of God in Jesus Christ is the greatest privilege for us and this privilege entails the greatest responsibility. If we love Jesus our Saviour, then we have to carry his cross proudly and to be witnesses to His goodness and a beacon of hope in the life of our communities through the resurrection and the empty tomb.

To God be the Glory, Majesty, and the Worship, now and for ever. Amen