

In the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem
22nd February 2017

Re-dedication of St Saviour's, Acre (Akko), Northern Israel.

The Diocese of Jerusalem this week celebrates God's goodness and marvels at the work of the Holy Spirit. For, on 21st February 2017 the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem, the Most Reverend Suheil Dawani, re-dedicated St Saviour's Church in Acre. He did so in the presence of c.700 people, including the Greek Patriarch, His Beatitude Theophilos III; the Bishop of the Maronite Church in the Holy Land, the Right Reverend Musa Haj; the Imam of Al-Jazzar Mosque, Samir Asie; and representatives from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities, as well as individuals who had longed for the re-opening and reviving of this church since the majority of its congregation concerned about their security situation left Acre in 1948.

Acre is an extraordinary corner of the Holy Land, with one of the best natural harbours in the region. Acre has been a prominent city since it was mentioned in the tribute list of Pharaoh Thutmose III in 16th century BCE. And before its capture by the crusaders in 1104, it had been held by the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, Persians, the Greeks and the Umayyads. St Paul visited it (cf. Acts 21.7), referring to it as Ptolemais and within 150 years it had a bishop.

Acre became *the* port where pilgrims disembarked. The Crusaders built a complex fort with tunnels, churches and hospitals. It was captured by the Muslim commander Saladin and re-taken by Richard-the-Lion-Heart, before being re-captured by the Mamelukes, the Ottomans, the Egyptians, the Turks, and the British.

The Anglican presence in Acre is more recent. The Church Mission Society opened schools in 1874 and 1887, and developed a small hospital. In 1946 Archdeacon Campbell McInnes (later Archbishop) with Reverend Najib Cubain (later the first Palestinian to become an Anglican Bishop) were present when the foundation stone was laid. Bishop Stewart dedicated the church in 1947.

The church quickly thrived, and although a small building, the congregation was said to number 500. However, in 1948 the Christians in Acre became increasingly worried about their safety and that of their families. Many left the city, with a large number going to Lebanon. Over the next forty years, St Saviour's, without a regular priest or congregation, fell into a state of disrepair.

For the Diocese, the re-dedication of St Saviour's marks an extraordinary moment – this is the second church to be re-dedicated by Archbishop Suheil. In 2011 St Paul's in Jerusalem, closed in 1948, was re-dedicated. The Diocese is now focused on re-dedicating St Peter's in Jaffa, which has been closed since 1948.

Such ministry shows the dedication and the tenacity of the Diocese of Jerusalem, while small in number – there are between 5000 and 7000 Anglicans spread over the five countries: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel; the Diocese continues to minister in some of the most difficult places and with enormous obstacles, whether that be its hospitals in Gaza and Nablus or reviving closed churches.

The re-opening of St Saviour's points to one of the central missions of this Church in the Holy Land: to foster ecumenical and inter-faith relationships which are at the heart of the ministry of reconciliation and peace that the Diocese of Jerusalem works towards.

On Tuesday evening, the Greek Patriarch spoke warmly of the renewed Anglican presence in Acre. The Imam expressed his excitement that a new place of worship in the community was now open. Archbishop Suheil in his sermon noted that for Christians communities in the Holy Land "there [must be] resurrection after death, light after darkness, and hope after sadness." He went on to state that:

"[i]f 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 any 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."

There is a real hope, the Archbishop stated, that St Saviour's can create a worshipping community that leads "leads us to goodness, security, justice, peace, and prosperity for all."

69 years on, this Diocese has a new confidence that Anglicans in Acre can once again thrive. Here in the Holy Land where stories of pain and suffering are a daily reality; St Saviour's is a genuine story of 'Good News'.

The Very Reverend Canon Hosam Naoum
Dean of St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem