

**A Sermon by the Revd Canon Hosam Naoum  
The Diocesan Conference- Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham UK  
October 11, 2011**

**Text: Romans 1: 16-25; Ps. 19: 1-4; Luke 11: 37-41.**

I bring you greetings from the Holy Land and the Diocese of Jerusalem. I would like also to extend greetings and peace to you from Bishop Suheil Dawani and the Cathedral Church of St. George the Martyr in Jerusalem. I would like to express our deep and profound thanks and gratitude for your kind invitation to be part of this Conference and to share with you the word of God and the life of the Christian community, the Living Stones of the Holy Land, or as some of us would call it, the Land of the Holy One.

When Canon Nigel Rooms told me that this conference would be working with the image of ‘enlarging the tent’, I thought that this was a very powerful and appropriate image to meditate upon, especially when someone like me comes from a place where tents are very common and have very rich meanings.

What first comes to mind when the term ‘tent’ is mentioned is the virtue of ‘hospitality’ and a ‘safe space’ especially when it comes to strangers. Even though hospitality as a virtue, traditionally speaking, is neither ‘Cardinal’ nor ‘Christian’, I would argue that hospitality is at the core of our faith, both in the New and the Old Testaments.

One of the most sacred and foundational doctrines of the Christian faith is the ‘Trinity’, which brings all other dogmas together, particularly, when we affirm our faith with the creeds of the Church. According to some Christian Eastern Traditions the icon which was painted to describe the ‘Holy Trinity’ was drawn almost entirely from the image of Abraham welcoming the three angels of the Lord at Mamre. In fact, the icon is properly called the ‘Hospitality of Abraham’, in Genesis 18: 1-15.

That was an incident which evolved around the tent of Abraham. In fact, the word tent was mentioned five times in that short episode. Actually the tent was the source of Abraham’s hospitality and the means for providing a safe space for the three visitors who had come with Good news of God’s promise!

The tent was also adopted by the people of Israel in the wilderness as a safe space for worship, the ‘Tabernacle’ or ‘the tent of meeting’. This image was a source of encouragement and support for the newly freed people, and the tent of meeting has become the ‘*miskhan*’ or the dwelling place of the divine presence, and a sanctuary of the Lord who brought them out of the land of slavery.

In Isaiah, where our image ‘enlarging the tent’ is taken from (Is. 54.2), there is conveyed a message of hope and prosperity for the troubled community in Judea and Samaria. **“Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.”** Hospitality, for Isaiah’s community, provides the hope of return from exile and alienation; the hope of restoration and salvation.

In the light of these wonderful images in the Bible, how do we understand our tents to be? And, how ready are we to enlarge our own tents? I believe that a 'Tent', allegorically speaking, is a place that provides a safe space for a community of faith, which tries to live out the virtue of 'hospitality'.

This hospitality demands an ongoing enlargement of one's own tent, both for an individual as well as a community, to include other people who might be aliens or strangers to us.

St. Paul is a great example for us, especially for his own time, showing how to enlarge one's tent. Paul, a tent maker himself, was very keen to bring both Jews and Gentiles together under the tent of the gospel. Today's reading does not only contain the foundational thesis for the Epistle to the Romans, but also serves as a very good invitation to enlarge the tent. In Romans 1: 16-18, Paul states: **'For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'**

Paul, in Romans and other epistles, referred to Abraham's faith with regard to salvation and justification, and quoting the Old Testament he calls Abraham 'the father of all nations'. The faith of Abraham in God and in God's faithfulness is what draws Paul's attention. Thus, Paul wants the people of Rome to believe in the power of the gospel, that is, the power of the cross for salvation, which invites all people, even the whole creation, to the tent of God. The tent is a space where the whole community of faith is embraced by God's love to unite them in Jesus Christ.

As Christians around the world try to make sense of the universality of God's love and hospitality towards God's creation, diversity becomes a blessing on the one hand and a curse on the other. The question of where do we draw the line between what is a stretching and enlarging of the tent, and the destruction of the tent, often becomes a controversial issue. Or in other words, when enlarging and stretching one's tent, the challenge that most communities and individuals face is how can they provide hospitality and a safe space without compromising their faith?

Coming back at our image of enlarging the tent, we should be aware of the steps which are essential to the construction of the tent. The tent is supported by poles that hold the tent from the inside, with a central pole that is the biggest and highest of all poles. Secondly one has to provide a mat or a cover on the ground in order to create a safe space for those who are being welcomed into the tent. Thirdly, there is the fixing of the loose ends of the tent by stretching the stakes in order to protect and stabilize the tent from falling.

The central pole for the tent in the Diocese of Jerusalem is Jesus Christ. But I would like to explore this in Trinitarian terms as God the Son. It is the mutuality of giving and receiving at the heart of the Trinity which is its strength. It is love, the loved, and the beloved that form a community and provide hospitality. From this the tent can safely be extended as the poles of peace, reconciliation and hospitality.

Through the parishes and institutions and different programs, which the diocese runs within Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, we promote hospitality through our invitation to all people of all faiths to reconciliation and peace.

Despite the great and sad alienation and separation between many Palestinians and Israelis, the diocese, with many other peoples of different faiths who share the same concern for peace and reconciliation, is determined to enlarge the tent for the common good of all people of the Holy Land, the children of Abraham.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! Amen.