The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity/
The Feast of St. Luke the Evangelist

St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem

The 111th anniversary of the consecration of the Cathedral of St. George the Martyr.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On this day in 1898, at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, on the feast day of St. Luke the Evangelist, this Cathedral was consecrated for use according to the worship and practice of the Church of England, as part of the Anglican Communion. The Bishop of Salisbury, the Rt. Rev'd John Wordsworth, representing the Archbishop of Canterbury at the request of the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, the Rt. Rev'd George Francis Popham Blyth, took the principle role in the consecration, which was witnessed by a host of Anglicans, and ecumenical and political representatives from throughout the holy city. As near as I can tell, you are sitting in the very chairs used on that morning, 111 years ago today.

This cathedral was built during the 1890's, under the watchful eye of Bishop Blyth and with the cooperation of the Greek Patriarchate of the time. The relationship between the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Anglican community here had fallen upon hard times. Repairing and restoring this relationship was the calling of Bishop Blyth upon his arrival in 1887. The Greek Patriarch and Bishop Blyth brought forth a cooperative spirit and through their renewed relationship, the Patriarch became enthusiastic in his support of the building of an Anglican cathedral on this site which had long been known as "tel Kineseh" – hill of the church.

Subsequent excavations preparing for the foundations of the Cathedral revealed traces of a church from the Byzantine era, perhaps in the 5th or 6th centuries, along with tombs and cisterns of other centuries on this site. Remnants of stone work of that time grace the grounds of the cathedral even today along with small mosaics which have been preserved in the floor of the Chapel of St. Michael and all Angels.

The Greek Patriarch urged Bishop Blyth to include a residence for the Bishop on the grounds of the Cathedral to provide oversight for services held in the Cathedral; thereby ensuring that worship was indeed according to Anglican tradition, liturgy and theology. The Patriarch wanted to ensure that "episcopal" oversight was not merely in name only. Bishop Blyth included quarters in his plan which has provided housing for subsequent bishops and now for Bishop Suheil and his family.

The Cathedral was built in two stages. The first stage came down as far as what we now see as the crossing. It was not until 1910 that the crossing, transepts, two additional chapels, choir, high altar and bell tower were completed.

This building has seen its share of conflict throughout the past 111 years. The Ottoman Turks took over the property, including St. George's School on the adjacent land for the duration of the First World War. The Cathedral was closed; Bishop Blyth went home to England; the surrender agreement which ended hostilities in Jerusalem in 1917 was signed on what is now the Bishop's desk. During the 1948 and 1967 conflicts, the Cathedral saw considerable damage – stained glass windows were blown out, an organ and the original pulpit were destroyed and the roof was damaged.
During these times of armed conflict, prayers were held regularly in the Chapel of St. Michael and all Angels where it was safest for those who came to pray. The places where you see clear glass throughout the Cathedral today provide mute testimony to the violence and destruction of earlier times.

Cathedrals provide the symbol and center of a bishop's pastoral, liturgical and teaching ministry. The word "cathedral" refers to the place where the bishop's "cathedra" – the bishop's chair or seat – is housed. When the bishop speaks "ex-cathedra", it is from the chair, from the seat of authority as bishop of the diocese that the bishop has something very important to offer the clergy and people of the diocese.

Cathedrals are powerful symbols of hope in a world which is desperate for good news. Cathedrals are sometimes larger than life, engaging our imaginations, lifting our spirits and encouraging us to look up as we seek out the details of stained glass windows, stonework and ceilings – we are drawn heavenward by our eyes as we look above for the peace of God which passes all understanding. Cathedrals are intended by their design and their presence to gather God's people for prayer and to lift them out of the ordinary, out of the normal and, in a sense, to bring us to a fresh inspiring insight into our relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Bishop Suheil has made it a cornerstone of his ministry to be clear to all who have ears to hear, that this Cathedral, in the holy city of Jerusalem welcomes all who enter her heavy doors. Here in Jerusalem, all of God's people are welcome. We welcome all, we welcome all to pray, to listen for the Holy Spirit, to sing their praises, to shed their tears, to confess their sorrows, to celebrate the gift of life, to reflect upon the sacrifice of Christ, to discover what that offering on Golgotha means to each faithful soul. The heart of a pilgrim is the heart that is open to the work of the Holy Spirit; we are all pilgrims and all are welcome here.

I have not been able to discover the exact reason why St. Luke's Day was chosen for the consecration of this Cathedral. Could it be that the date was merely convenient for all the participants – I would like to think there was a more inspiring purpose. St. Luke the Physician, St. Luke the Evangelist emphasizes throughout his Gospel the good news of Christ as a healer and reconciler – bringing people with contrite and penitent hearts to a new faith in God, a faith which truly brings healing to heart, soul, body and mind. Saint Luke records our Lord Jesus Christ spending a lot of time and energy, by word and example, on the need to restore peace and wholeness among all people with God, within ourselves, and with our neighbors.

This message rooted in the good news of Luke's Gospel has been important throughout the generations. This message of peace and healing was important under the Ottoman administration of 1898 throughout this region on the Feast of St. Luke and it is no less important for the political and religious leadership of the Middle East of our own time.

May this Cathedral, by its presence and through your participation in prayer and praise, continue to be a symbol of hope; a reminder by its very presence of God's call for peace among all of God's people; a place of proclamation where Bishop Suheil may continue to inspire and challenge all who have ears to hear in the way of justice and peace.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.