

REFLECTION OF HIS BEATITUDE IN ADVENT

Reflections of His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem during Advent while on official visit to the United Kingdom

“As the leader of a Church that has had a presence in the Holy Land since the very birth of Christianity, Patriarch Theophilos III can trace his succession 2.000 years to St. James, the brother of Jesus, the First Bishop of Jerusalem.

Sam Hailes meets the Greek Orthodox leader

It won't surprise you to learn that I don't have much in common with the Patriarch of Jerusalem. He's 67 years old, speaks mainly in Greek and lives in the Middle East.

The services he presides over are full of bells, incense and chanting. It's a world away from the evangelical contexts in which I typically find myself, where guitars and skinny jeans abound.

Following his recent meetings in London with Most Rev. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Prince Charles (both have a keen interest in the plight of Christians in the Holy Land), Patriarch Theophilos III shared the following reflections with *Premier Christianity*.

In the process of meeting the Patriarch, I had the opportunity to relearn a vital lesson: styles of clothing, worship and liturgy might appear to divide us Christians but, in reality, when it comes to the fundamentals of our beliefs we have far more in common than most may think.

You are charged with administering many of the holy sites in Jerusalem, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which

is built on the place Jesus is traditionally thought to have been crucified and buried. How does it feel to stand in those places?

Jerusalem is the place of the divine-human encounter. It is there that you realize what the mystery of the incarnation is, because the typography and geography are an undeniable testimony to this great event of the incarnation of the divine Logos.

To be on the very spot which is connected with the earthly life or the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, of course, has a very specific impact. The Holy Land in general is a place of divine energy.

Some Christians here in the UK have taken sides in the political conflict, supporting either Israel or the Palestinians. What is your message to those who are taking sides?

In the Holy Land, and especially in Jerusalem, there are more than 15 Christian denominations. What is good is that we as churches get together and discuss all issues. And we try, of course, not to turn ourselves into politicians; this would be a disaster. But, at the same time, it doesn't mean we are indifferent to what is happening, and from time to time we have to raise our voices. But we do this always in the context of the love of the gospel, because this is actually what must be our mission – not to just speak about peace; it's not enough. We have to always speak of reconciliation. We are, I think, the only body, the only institution – the Christian Church and the Christian community – that can really bring the two groups to an understanding of each other.

You've talked before about Jerusalem not just being a place of history but you've said it's also where the last days will take place...

Correct, this is true. Although, not me; it's St. John the

Evangelist.

Well, many Christians will read the words of St. John in Revelation and they'll come away scratching their heads, thinking: "I'm not sure if I understand any of this." Can you help?

When we read the gospel, always we hear about the last days, about the last judgment etc. We should take into account what is going on around us, all this phenomena, these so-called natural disasters. Be ready, be at work. But, at the same time, remember the day has not come yet. We should not talk too much about the last days or about the antichrist as much as we must talk about Christ himself and look after our own personal spiritual advance and commitment to our faith.

How do you personally share the Good News with those who perhaps have no concept of what it means to be a Christian?

The core of the political conflict is about the holy places; it's about religion. So we have a mission, and our mission is precisely this: to keep these holy places as spiritual oases, so that people who are visiting today can drink from this water. No matter what people say about themselves in public, within the human being there is the inner man. This is the soul, and as much as the body needs biological food, so the soul needs very special food. This is our mission – to provide people with spiritual food. I've had many experiences of people saying: "I had nothing to do with faith, I was totally indifferent, but I don't know, after I entered the Holy Sepulchre something happened to me."

The Christian Church around the world is divided into different denominations. What should Christian unity look like in our context today?

There is a nice and very special word that can be found only in the dictionaries of the Church Fathers – *autexousious*: that is to say, every human being has been made not just after the

image and likeness of God, but they have the gift of God to be free. Nobody is forced to believe in God. Therefore, it makes sense that everyone has his own understanding in interpretation of faith.

What is important to me is to be ecumenical but not ecumenist. Ecumenical means you stick to your own tradition, the way you were brought up.

So, we don't apologise for our differences...

On the contrary.

...but we see to bless one another at the same time?

Yes. This is a healthy ecumenical spirit.

We sometimes hear that Christians in the Holy Land feel forgotten by the rest of the Church.

You have touched on an interesting point. I am receiving pilgrims around the clock every day, and I meet people that have been to the Holy Land five times, six times, ten times. Everyone who has been to Jerusalem for pilgrimage rally wants to come back again!

I'm telling the Christians: "Your presence here, your pilgrimage, is a blessing for you, and your families, your country, but it's a blessing for us." And when I say "for us", I mean for the Christian Community. Why? Because the Christian Community here, by your presence, feel that they are not abandoned, they are not forgotten."

Sam Hailes is editor of Premier Christianity.

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