

***The First Church of the Diocese of Jerusalem: A Work in Progress—or Maybe Not
The Third Sunday of Advent, 11 December 2011***

Christ Church, just inside the Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem, is often referred to as the first Anglican church built in the Middle East. As with so many historical statements, in a way that is true, but in another way it is false. Christ Church in Jerusalem was indeed built before Christ Church in Nazareth, and the first bishops of what is now the Diocese of Jerusalem (Anglican Communion)—the fascinating rabbi-bishop Michael Solomon Alexander, and the industrious and long-serving French-Swiss bishop Samuel Gobat—had Christ Church in the Jaffa Gate as their main church. But Christ Church in Jerusalem never belonged to the Diocese of Jerusalem. The land belonged for a time to the Danish Lutheran missionary Hans Nicolayson (1803-1856);¹ the Nicolaysons are the first known Protestant family to settle down and live permanently in Jerusalem. Today it is owned by the Christian Ministry to the Jews, formerly known as the London Jews Society, of which Nicolayson was a missionary. In other words, while Anglican bishops ministered in and from Christ Church (Jerusalem), it never actually belonged to the Diocese of Jerusalem or its previous iterations.

Thus the honor of the first church of the Diocese of Jerusalem—meaning built by and owned by that diocese—goes to Christ Church in Nazareth, the only Anglican church in the city. Some of the locals still call it *al kaniisa al ingliziyya*—the English Church, even though there are no English people who attend the church on a regular basis. While Christ Church Nazareth is the first church of the diocese, it is neither the largest church—Church of the Redeemer Amman²—nor is it the principal church—the Cathedral Church of St. George the Martyr in Jerusalem.³ After some time in Nazareth, the visitor asked the then-vicar if he and his family could become members of the parish. He responded that he would need to talk to the lay leadership committee (similar to a vestry in the United States) about this. After conferring with them he responded that they would need baptismal certificates for the whole family, and ecclesial documents certifying that the visitor and his wife had been both confirmed and married according to the church. During a recent sojourn

¹ Additional details on Nicolayson can be found in Gerald Anderson's *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (Eerdmans, 1999). The complete history of the founding of and construction of Christ Church in the Jaffa Gate is found in Kelvin Crombie's *A Jewish Bishop in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Nicolayson's, 2006) and much of the subsequent history is in another book of his, *For the Love of Zion* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1991).

² For a church review on the Arabic-language congregation of Church of the Redeemer, see *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76:3 (September 2007), 404-408.

³ For two reviews on the diocesan cathedral in this journal see one written by Lewis Wright, 61:3 (1992), 379-382 and by Duane Alexander Miller, 76:4 (December 2007), 549-554. The latter is an account of the installation of the present diocesan bishop.

in the United States, the visitor and his wife procured all the needed documents: the baptismal certificate from the small Lutheran church in Montana where the visitor was baptized as a baby, a certificate from the Christian and Missionary Alliance church in Hawaii, whose pastor baptized his wife in the Pacific Ocean, and everything else they requested. All the documents were sent to the pastor in Nazareth by post, but as of the day of the visit no answer had been received from the parish regarding their request. The purpose of this account is to explain a key fact of the life of the parish: apparently no one new ever joins the church.

In 1851 some of the Nazarenes begged then-bishop Gobat to open a school for boys in Nazareth and send them a cleric, which he did. Eventually an orphanage was also opened, and though it does not function as an orphanage today, locals still call it that. The church building itself was consecrated in 1871, under the leadership of John Zeller, sometimes known by his German birth name, Johannes Zeller. The story is told that the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) visited Nazareth in 1862, and the need for a church building was explained to him by Zeller, and that he made the first contribution toward its construction of ten pounds sterling.

As with so many of the early Anglican missionaries in Palestine, his ministry was supervised by the Church Mission Society (C.M.S.) of England, though he himself was from the continent. Zeller is an obscure figure. He did not publish any complete books to the author's knowledge, and one finds only a few English-language articles by him. He wrote a short article on the village of Cana (not far from Nazareth) and its relation to the Biblical village of the same name, and this was published in the quarterly statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund. We also find a lively account of a locust swarm in Nazareth in the *Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor*, which is worth repeating here in part:

While I am writing this the locusts are covering my court my roofs and all the walls of my house so perfectly that we had to shut ourselves up in our rooms and close every door and window carefully. But as often as the door is opened a dozen jump in. The little garden in our house and every flower is destroyed. The whole country will soon be a desert. The necessary consequence must be famine and disease.⁴

According to Richter, Zeller worked in Nazareth for about twenty years, and then spent the same amount of time in Jerusalem.⁵ He was married to the daughter of Samuel Gobat, the second bishop of the diocese, the man who was, as far as the founding of the institutions of the diocese which are so fundamental to its existence today, the chief architect and great builder of the diocese as it exists today. Hannah Zeller illustrated a book titled *Wild Flowers of the Holy Land*⁶ during her lengthy time in Palestine.

⁴ *The Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor* 1 (December 1865), 180.

⁵ Julius Richter, *A History of Protestant Missions in the Near East* (New York: AMS Press, 1970 [1910]), 244.

⁶ First edition: London: James Nisbet 1875.

It was John Zeller who was the pastor of the congregation when the building was consecrated in 1871, though the spire was never completed. Because of this, the church itself is an underwhelming structure, especially because it is only a block away from the Basilica of the Annunciation (Roman Catholic), which is the largest church building in the entire Middle East. Not only is the Basilica much more recent than Christ Church, but its modern design by Giovanni Muzio and its unique cupola and spire make it the focal point of the entire cityscape.

And so, after a year away from Nazareth, the visitor returns to Christ Church once again, this time on the third Sunday of Advent.⁷ Those driving a car will have a hard time finding a place to park, but once they do, they approach the church and find a bilingual plaque on the wall which reads in Arabic, “Evangelical Church of Christ,” and then in English “Christ Church, Anglican,” with the date 1871. The plaque, dating back to the Ottoman Empire, has no Hebrew, and even today no Jews live in Nazareth, though it is part of Israel (and not in the occupied West Bank). One must then go through a gate and walk up three flights of stone stairs to arrive at the small plaza in front of the church building. There is no facility for disabled people to get to the church. Entering the church into a very small narthex, there is bookshelf with hymnals, prayer books, bibles, and a pile of the booklets containing the “test liturgy,” which has now been in use for several years. If one continues to the left past the bookshelf they will arrive at the door to which goes to a very tight winding staircase that ascends to a choir loft. Since there is no choir, the loft is not in regular use, although it is where the ropes to ring the church bells are found. The bells were a gift from German Christians in the city of Wurtemberg, and they are made of metal from guns that the Germans captured during the 1870 Franco-German war. There are bird feathers on the stairs, and it seems clear that not only humans use these facilities. In the tiny narthex, to the right, is a door that leads to a small room for the priest to prepare. There is a mirror here and a chair.

Continuing into the church, through two swinging doors, is the nave. The church is small, but the ceiling is high. The walls are painted white. In the right transept are pews and a piano; in the left transept is a door, a baptismal font (upon which the Advent wreath is laid), and a small organ which is used throughout the service. There is one aisle and there are wooden pews to the right and the left. Each pew can hold four people comfortably. Based on this calculation the church could hold about a hundred people on the ground floor if full. There are no chapels, no statues, no paintings, and no icons. There are colored windows high up in the walls through which natural light flows. The only stained-glass window is high up behind the communion table. Indicating the low church, evangelical, C.M.S. origins of this church, there is no communion rail. Behind the communion table is a black tableau, upon which is written the inaugural verse of Jesus’ Nazareth sermon, “The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me...” in flowing Arabic calligraphy. In a similar vain, nowhere in the church is there a crucifix, though there are Roman crosses on the doors from the narthex to the nave. The entire church is built of stone.

⁷ The author has posted multiple pictures of the church on the Internet, which can be accessed at tinyurl.com/cj4vxcq.

Before the service begins, the priest is preparing things and the organist is playing as people wander in to the church and sit. There are no deacons, acolytes, or other servers.⁸ There are about twenty-five people present at the procession, and another few will straggle in, bringing the total to just more than thirty. There are two little children present, and one teen. The service is austere but proper, dignified and conducted by the book: The church bell rings. The procession is a simple affair, as the priest just walks from the entry to the front of the church. He is wearing a purple chasuble with some gold embroidery. All hymns are in Arabic. We stand and sing the hymn “Christians, awake, salute the happy morn,” from the 1990 Arabic hymnal, to the tune *Yorkshire*. We pray the prayer of humble access as it is contained in the test liturgy. The priest reads the summary of the law, with the priest standing behind the communion table (which appears to be constructed to clearly indicate it is not an altar, though it is ornate and at the same time not just a normal table). The table is dressed in purple. We sing the *Kyrie eleison* in Greek. We read, from the prayer book, the collect for the third Sunday of Advent. We read Psalm 73 responsively, also from the prayer book. There is an elevated pulpit built of stone, but it is only used for episcopal visits and holy days. All the readings (minus the Gospel), and the sermon, are done from behind a compact but attractive, movable lectern. A layman reads the epistle. After the readings, we sing another hymn, to the tune *Abridge*. The hymnal informs us that this translation was done by one Suleiman Duumat, born in 1901, and as of the publication of the hymnal (in 1990, the priest tells later) still alive. The priest stands in front of the congregation, but not behind the lectern, and reads the Gospel from the eleventh chapter of Matthew. The response from the congregation is “Glory to you, Lord, for this holy Gospel.” The pastor preaches the sermon from behind the lectern, and not from the stone pulpit. It is rather difficult for the visitor to understand him because the electronic speakers make the sound bounce around the small nave with high ceilings. The visitor is normally able to follow Arabic-language sermons fairly well, and the pastor is speaking clearly, but the unnecessary amplification and the reverberation make his words difficult to understand.

As he is able, the visitor discerns a few points: John the Baptist points to Jesus and Jesus alone; the life of faith is like a boat, and all the rowers need to row in the same direction, and that as we prepare for Christmas we should focus on where we are in relation to Jesus—he does not move or leave us, but we can move away from him. In any case, the congregation seems to be interested in his homily. His tone is firm and strong. Though he himself is Jordanian,⁹ his wife is an Israeli Palestinian, and so he

⁸ During the pastorate of the previous vicar his daughter would act as acolyte, indicating that there is no tradition opposed to acolytes, just that at the moment there is no one to carry out this function. The current vicar also explains later allowing one child or another to be acolyte could easily inspire jealousy among other parents.

⁹ The first time the author met the present vicar was in Jordan, when the author was doing research on the Jordanian Anglicans, recently published as ‘The Episcopal Church in Jordan: Identity, Liturgy, and Mission’ in *Journal of Anglican Studies* 9:2 (November 2011), 134-153.

was moved to Nazareth in 2010 by the bishop. The Jordanian and Palestinian dialects of spoken Arabic are pretty close to each other, and he mixes colloquial local Arabic with the Modern Standard Arabic (M.S.A.) one might hear on television or the radio. It is not uncommon to hear this sort of admixture of technical and street Arabic in sermons, and the congregation does not seem to mind or even notice.

After the sermon we stand and recite the creed. After that we say the prayers of the people, standing. The priest says a general prayer for each topic, and then ends with the formula in the test liturgy, and then the people recite the one-sentence response in that text. During one of the prayers he asks God for peace between Israel and Palestine, and peace in all the Arab world—an especially urgent petition as Christians in Egypt and Syria are very concerned that new regimes with more strict formulations of the Islamic shari'a will result in fewer freedoms and greater anti-Christian violence.

Then the people recite the general confession, similar to what Anglicans in the United Kingdom or the United States would say. Then is the peace, and the congregation responds to the priest with, "And with your spirit, too." During the peace the organist plays. Then comes the offertory, which is done neatly, as the congregation sings a hymn to the tune *Sewley*, with text translated by Habiib Jirjis.

The test liturgy contains five Eucharistic prayers. That the booklet of the test liturgy contains the Arabic cognate of the Greek word "Eucharistic" is itself interesting to the visitor. The hymnal contains hymns for the "Lord's Supper," a term one would expect from a low-church tradition. But the use of the term "Eucharistic" in the test liturgy seems to reveal a movement towards a more ecumenically accepted vocabulary. Also, the tunes for the *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the *Lamb of God* are borrowed from the Roman Catholic Church. That having been said, much of the low-church evangelical ethos and *leiturgia* of the C.M.S. are present, as was the case at Redeemer in Amman, so it is not possible to say that the church has made a decisive transition from one tradition to another.

The eucharistic prayer used is the first of the five. Later on the priest will explain that he likes this one because it is very close to the old one in the prayer book, and because the people are used to it. But still, without any sense of condemnation he comments that in each parish the vicar and/or the congregation can choose the liturgy they prefer. He also says that in Jordan the people still prefer to use the Prayer Book, and not the test liturgy. This conversation yields no clear sense from this priest whether or not he actually likes the test liturgy. The congregation has clearly grown accustomed to it though, and they recite it in a loud voice.

The Lord's Prayer is sung. It is a very somber, almost funereal version, played *largo*. During this time the priest is kneeling at the table, which is significant because there is very little kneeling during the entire service. The people sit and then sing the *Lamb of God* in Arabic, again in a somber and *adagio* fashion, with the priest still kneeling at the table. During these two periods he sometimes covers his face with his hands—a particularly dramatic and uncommon gesture. But of what? Penitence? Humble preparation?

The people recite the verses common to Roman and Anglican Catholics, according to the test liturgy: “We are not worthy to come to this thy table....” The congregation is small, so people make their way to the front to commune without any direction. The priest alone administers the host and the wine. He dips the host in the wine and either hands it the communicant, or places it on their tongue. (Later on he will tell me that the people in Jordan don’t like to use wafers, but prefer using an actual loaf of bread.) As people sit after communion many of them chat with each other; of the thirty or so people in the congregation only two actually kneel on the hard wooden benches to pray. We then sing a hymn to the tune *Duane Street*, translated by Saliim Kassaab (1842-1907). After the hymn is over the priest walks quickly to the doors and says, “Go in the peace of Messiah.” The congregation responds, and the service is concluded.

After the service, people step outside to smoke, and then into the fellowship hall behind the church to drink Turkish coffee. In the fellowship hall is a table with evangelistic literature and a picture of the diocesan bishop. The previous bishop—a divisive figure, to say the least—was from Nazareth, and several of his relatives left the church after the diocese sued him. The result was that the courts found against him in a case related to the ownership of the local Anglican school, going so far as to bar him from entering the grounds of Christ Church School Nazareth without prior permission from the diocese. Have some of those people come back since the new vicar was installed? Attendance is higher than a year prior, when last the visitor was there. And what of the test liturgy? The local Anglicans seem to have become accustomed to it.

Finally, a glance at the attendance indicates the uncertain future of Anglicanism in Israel. Two children and one teen do not seem to indicate a church that can continue to engage future generations of Anglican Israeli Palestinian Christians very well. Whether this is a kerygmatic fault of the parish or simply a matter of its physical inaccessibility is hard to say, but either way the problem remains.

All in all, Christ Church Nazareth repeats to us many of the challenges facing Anglicans throughout the Middle East in general. First, are they Evangelicals—like the local Baptists and Nazarenes—or sacramental, catholic Christians like the Roman, Greek, and Maronite Catholics and the Jerusalemite Orthodox? Will the church ever formulate a coherent response to the constant emigration of young Christians—an issue that is in fact much more urgent, and more able to be addressed by the church, than the apparently interminable Israel-Palestine conflict? These unanswered questions recall to the visitor the unfinished construction of this church building, the first of the diocese. Its foundation and basic structure are intact, if not perfect, but its spire, its glory and pinnacle, has languished. Moreover, nobody today is really making an effort to complete it.

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