

## Can any good thing come out of Antioch?

Written by Father Michael Harper

The plain answer to this question is – yes, the Church in Antioch was founded by St Peter and St Paul. Then there were St Barnabas, St Ignatius, St John Chrysostom and St John of Damascus to quote the most famous. As far as this country is concerned one can mention also St Theodore of Tarsus, arguably the most effective and most influential Archbishop of Canterbury in the history of the office.

But St Theodore was a ‘one off.’ After him, right up until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Antioch has been conspicuous by its absence in this country. However we need to remember that the other jurisdictions, too, had little or no presence here from the Great Schism until the last Century. If people in this country know very little about the Greek and Russian Orthodox, they will know virtually nothing about the Antiochian Orthodox.

The Patriarchate of Antioch seemed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be in terminal decline. However, new health and vigour came about through two major changes. Before 1898 the Antiochian Patriarch and the senior Priests were all Greek, but in that year an Arab Patriarch was appointed, and today all the Antiochian Priests in the Middle East are Arabs. The second change took place with the setting up in 1942 of the Orthodox Youth Movement, which greatly helped to revive the Patriarchate, and leaders emerged from this Movement, including the present Patriarch, His Beatitude Ignatius IV. Today there is vibrant life in the Patriarchate in Lebanon and Syria, and a revival of the monastic life, with the creation of a number of new monasteries, one of which is only open to graduates.

The Antiochian *diaspora* is spread over several continents, with over half a million in North America, and a growing and expanding presence in Australia, and South America. The Antiochian Patriarchate was first planted in this country about twenty years ago, when as a result of the Lebanese civil war and other pressures in the Middle East, a growing number of immigrants settled here. There are around 15 million Arab Christians in the world, and a number of Orthodox from Lebanon and Syria decided there should be a Church in London at which they could worship. St George’s Cathedral was leased and services have been held there, largely in Arabic, for over twenty years. The present Priest, Father Samir Gholam, is Lebanese.

A new and unusual situation developed in 1995 through the creation in England (and subsequently Ireland as well) of a network of English speaking communities. All this took two years or so, to come to fruition. The process began in early 1993 when the 'Pilgrimage to Orthodoxy' was set up by a small group of Anglicans, who had decided to leave the Church of England and seek to become Orthodox. I was invited to be the President of this group, and our initial contacts and support came from Metropolitan Philip of the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America. Some of us visited his headquarters in New Jersey towards the end of 1993. He commissioned a Priest, Father Michael Keiser, to come over to this country regularly to catechise us, and help us to set up a Deanery.

The links with North America caused some concern, so our Patriarch, His Beatitude Ignatius IV, placed us under his protection, and linked us with Bishop Gabriel, who lived in Paris and was then the Vicar-General for the Antiochian Church in Western Europe. It has since become a Diocese and he is now our Archbishop. In a historic moment in September 1994, a group of us went to Paris to meet our Patriarch in our Bishop's apartment, and he held out his arms to us and welcomed us "home". Many of us wept with joy.

In March 1995 my wife and I were received into the Orthodox Church. Three days later we went to Paris and I was ordained Deacon by Bishop Gabriel in the Greek Cathedral. Two weeks later we were to return, and on April 1<sup>st</sup> I was ordained Priest. Who says the Orthodox Church can't move fast! I was ordained on April Fools' Day, and it has been a comfort ever since to know that the Orthodox do have a place for fools for Christ. We celebrate this year our tenth anniversary.

The policy of the Deanery has been straight-forward from the first – we are whole-heartedly committed to being a Church in which English people can feel at home, with our services in English, and our goals to help to bring our country back to God and its ancient Christian heritage. Equally we welcome all Orthodox as true partners with us in this task, whatever their nationality. We do not believe that culture or ethnicity should ever divide Christians. On the other hand, if we are to have a Christian influence to our fellow countrymen, the language has to be English.

We have also from day one, sought to work as closely as possible with all Orthodox. It was to me symbolic that at my ordination in Paris, a Greek Bishop was present, and was the one who directed me around the Holy

Table. The Deanery has played a full part in the setting up of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge. I was myself present at all the early meetings, and the Patriarchate and Deanery have been amongst the most generous donors. This has also been true of the new course “The Way”, which has several Antiochians on the committee and amongst the speakers. Many of us were present at the Swanwick conference last summer, where the goal of one Orthodox jurisdiction was made clear, and we are committed to that goal.

As Antiochians we have an advantage – we are named after a city and not an ethnic group. Ethnically the Patriarchate is Arab, but the leadership everywhere encourages the development of national bodies. In North America, the Antiochians see themselves, even if they are Arabs, primarily as Americans. This appeals to the public, and the Church is now growing fast, and incorporating more and more Americans who are not Arabs. It was the Antiochians who welcomed the 2000 American Evangelicals who wanted to join some years ago. It was a risk, but, I believe, it has paid off. The Patriarch, in welcoming them “home” humbly asked them to bring their gifts with them, which they have done, and evangelism is becoming rightly an important ministry in the Archdiocese.

For Antiochians a favourite text is Acts 11:26, “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.” The Patriarchate has become very cosmopolitan in the last hundred years, as it was in the beginning: it needs to be remembered that it was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas began their missionary journeys, which were to spread eventually to Rome itself. The Patriarchate today is rediscovering its missionary heritage, and as we thank God for the blessings of the first ten years, we desire to develop that same vision in our Deanery.