

Maundy Thursday 2021 – John 13.1-17 ‘How do we ‘Do this...?’ (from Fr. Mike).

Let me tell you about one of the world’s most important spiritual leaders, and guide to over 260 million people. He presides in a country that is now 99% Muslim. The authorities there have regularly seized Christian properties, closing churches, monasteries and schools. His parish fear that the oldest of Christian churches, together with its patriarch are threatened. His official title is: ‘His All Holiness, Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, Ecumenical Patriarch.’

Ecumenical means universal, and Orthodox Christians look to this man (in effect as their ‘Pope’) for guidance in challenging circumstances.

I once asked this gentle, unassuming and prayerful man (who speaks 12 languages) how he would like to be addressed, and his humble reply was simply “The official title is ‘Your All Holiness’ but for me, Bartholomew is enough.”

While this patriarch occupies the ecumenical throne in the See of St. Andrew, his quarters are a far cry from that of the Vatican or Lambeth. He works from a cramped, austere office, his crowded desk littered with papers, and not one Michelangelo in site. Today, all that is left of a Christian Byzantium empire once ruled from Constantinople (now Istanbul) is a modest complex of nine small buildings squeezed into less than an acre of land. This Headquarters is at St. George’s church in the rundown ‘Fenar’ (Lighthouse) district of Istanbul and has been the heart of Orthodox Christianity since 1599.

Bartholomew promotes an understated and informal atmosphere, in contrast to the ritual surrounding the Pope in Rome. No cathedral for Bartholomew, only a modest church. The surrounding neighbourhood (originally Greek and Christian) is today

predominantly Muslim. Why does he still live here? Because he was here 'since the foundation of the church of Constantinople,' on the Bosphorus strait, where East meets West. The skyline is dominated by Minarets, and at Friday prayers the mosques are teeming, but the churches are more meccas for tourists than worshippers. The Hagia Sophia – first church in Christendom, built 1,000 years before St. Peter's in Rome and for centuries the most important church in the Christian world, is now a mosque.

At the turn of the last century there were nearly two million Orthodox Christians in Turkey. One and a half million Christians were expelled in 1923, and another 150,000 left after the anti-Christian riots in 1955. Today the 3,000 Orthodox Christians left in Turkey are treated as 2nd class citizens.

Bartholomew, when asked why he stays in a land that does not respect him, simply reminds us that St. John, St. Paul and St. Matthias all had an undisputed ministry in this part of the world, and "for 17 centuries, the mission of Christ has been here." So, for Bartholomew it is mandatory and therefore the only acceptable response - just like wearing a face mask in public during the Coronavirus pandemic.

As well as being embedded in history, there is also a physical relationship with the land. 500 miles from Istanbul is the arid Cappadocia region. Here, Ihlara Canyon is home to numerous churches carved into the valley walls and rockface by early Christians as a refuge, to make a lasting city of stone.

Bartholomew acknowledges that it all started for us in Bethlehem and concluded in Jerusalem of course, but our *religion* began in Turkey.

If we turn our thoughts to the Sinai desert, at the foot of Mt Sinai is St. Catherine's monastery where according to tradition Moses received the Ten Commandments. Here, twenty-five monks currently service the smallest diocese in the world. The monks are all

Greek, apart from Fr. Justin (a converted Baptist from Texas) who is the chief librarian looking after countless manuscripts and literary treasures. The largest and oldest collection of icons in the world are here, and the monastery is still revered equally by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The monastery is also home to a little-known treasure in the form of a letter written by the prophet Mohammad (PBUH) written over 1400 years ago. Signed by his hand-print, it offers protection and religious freedom to the Christians of the monastery. Within this script, the prophet asks for tolerance and peace among people of differing faiths. However, Mohammad's undisputed message of tolerance has not been received by the Turkish authorities. The only Greek Orthodox seminary in Turkey (Halki) remains empty. Forced to close 'for reasons of state' in 1971, there are moves to reopen, but at present it is impossible to train new priests. Consequently, people who preach unity and love cannot be prepared – and this is clearly an offence to human dignity.

Bartholomew was born Dimitrios Arhondonis in Turkey. Ordained at the age of 21, he served in the Turkish army (like all citizens) and was elected Ecumenical Patriarch in 1991. Despite this pedigree, the Turkish government still only recognise him as a local bishop, refusing to acknowledge the international and ancient title or his unique spiritual status. Against this challenging political backdrop, together with being jeered, enduring threats and often spat upon in the street, Bartholomew truly believes in miracles. He sees Turkey as a continuation of Jerusalem, and Mission. He says, "it is given to us not only to believe in Christ, but to be crucified, and risk persecution." For him and his followers, this is sadly a daily reality.

Pointing out that Orthodox Christians have a 550-year history of co-existence with Moslems in the Middle East, this humble Christian patriarch has initiated a series of

meetings with Moslem leaders throughout the region in what he calls "a dialogue of loving truth." To strengthen that dialogue, he has travelled to Libya, Syria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Azerbaijan, Qatar and Bahrain, meeting with key political and religious figures in those countries. This is a unique achievement. As a result, Bartholomew still has more credibility and opportunity to create bridges between Christianity and Islam than any other prominent Christian leader. This is how you wash people's feet!

"We understand the grievances of the Moslem world against the West because the Orthodox world has been subjected to some of the same treatment in the past," he said. "Like us, they, too, have seen their faith dissected and their history disfigured, but we hope to put behind us what is unpleasant while putting forward the best values of mankind." What that means, he has made clear, is a total and unequivocal commitment to peace and tolerance. "We most categorically condemn every kind of fanaticism, transgression and use of violence, regardless of where they come from," he declared in an address before the European Parliament. "Our commitment to the need for free and peaceful communication among people and mutual respect and peaceful relations among nations remains unshaken..."

Patriarch Bartholomew has used the international respect he enjoys both in the West and in the Moslem world to create a strong front among religious leaders against the use of violence. Three months after September 11, 2001, he organized an interfaith conference in Brussels, co-sponsored by the president of the European Commission. This Patriarch played a key role in forging the famous declaration that emerged from the conference, which stated that **"war in the name of religion is war against religion."**

He later told Time magazine that religious extremists and terrorists "may be the most wicked false prophets of all. When they bomb, shoot and destroy, they steal more than life itself; they undermine faith, and faith is the only way to break the cycle of hatred and retribution."

Knowing from personal experience what misery and destruction religious hatred can produce, Bartholomew has tried to combat it in every way that his faith and his position permit. One of his major efforts during his first years as Patriarch was to convene an interfaith international conference on 'Peace and Religious Tolerance' in Istanbul. The conference brought together for the first time in the region Christians, Jews and Moslems to find ways to encourage understanding and peaceful coexistence among followers of the three faiths. "Beloved friends," he told delegates to the conference, "there is more that unites us than that which divides us. We have within our grasp the vision of the Psalmist, 'Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.'"

Our Lord gathered his friends around a table on that first Maundy Thursday, and although he was betrayed with a kiss shortly after in the garden of Gethsemane, that special meal introduced a way of life to change **everything**, forever. Jesus did not do what his followers expected. There was no plan to overthrow the brutal Roman oppressors. He simply washed his disciples' feet, showed them how to love one another, and for the first and last time, how to regularly remember him forever!

In this most Holy Week of our calendar, this is surely **a day to count our blessings and to pray deeply for our brothers and sisters**, wherever they may live, who continue to risk persecution and untold hardship each time they attempt to worship or exercise their basic human rights; especially those in Turkey.



His All Holiness, Bartholomew,

Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome, Ecumenical Patriarch, in the See of St. Andrew.

Please pray for this man today (either in church or your own ‘upper room’) and for all who walk in the shoes of Christ and his Apostles. Also, please find it in your heart to give thanks for those from other faiths who break bread together for peace, whoever and wherever they may be. Finally, if you feel a little trapped at home by the confines of Coronavirus (or other things) you might be wondering how to emulate our Lord on this Maundy Thursday, when the usual way of breaking bread together in our homes or restaurants is not possible this year, and even in church it must be ‘in one kind’ only?

Well, why not continue Bartholomew’s example and **wash one another’s feet with your prayers?** Also, if we can accept the divine and open invitation of Jesus by responding afresh to his call to worship in Communion, we shall draw true strength and lasting Hope from imbibing his blessed Sacrament, not only today, but at every God-given opportunity. Maundy Thursday reminds us that for faithful Christians this response is mandatory.

Fr. Mike - Maundy Thursday 2021.