

“As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.” (Ps 42:1)

The yearning of the human heart and soul for union with God is the most fundamental of all longings. The Scriptures are full of this yearning, and we have heard some of these words sung beautifully by the choir in this service: *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*

The Holy Land is the place where our sacred history was first revealed, and where this yearning of the human heart and soul for union with God found and continues to discover its divine-human encounter. The Christians of the Middle East are among those who bear this sacred history, and the testimony of this divine-human encounter, in their very lives and witness and they feel this deeply. The Holy Places that have been entrusted to us by Divine Providence are the spiritual oasis, “the flowing streams” as the Psalmist says, that refresh the soul.

It is not possible to really understand the Middle East without understanding the place that Christians hold in our region. We are natives of the land, a land that has been watered not only by the blood of many martyrs, but by the blood of the greatest of martyrs, Our Lord Jesus Christ himself. From the revealing of the Church at Pentecost in Jerusalem until now, Christians around the world have called this region home, and it is very important to us that this home is kept open to all.

We rejoice in the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious landscape of the Middle East, and we delight in the richness of the heritage that has helped to shape world history and civilisation. There is room for all in our region, and we are the heirs of a spirit of mutual respect, mutual understanding, and mutual affection that we strive to ensure characterises our common life together.

Being honest, ‘though, this long tradition today is under huge pressure. Christians in particular are facing unprecedented challenges and difficulties that the rest of the world cannot ignore. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which is the Mother of all the Churches, along with the other Churches and Christian communities of the region, are committed to the well-being and flourishing of the Christian presence not for ourselves alone, but for the sake of our society, and for the sake of the world, and all who look to the Holy Land in hope.

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As we gather in this great church to celebrate the contributions of Christians in the Middle East, may we remember that we gathered not for reasons of politics or economics, nor for any human purpose. We gather because we are inspired by the most fundamental longing, that great yearning of humankind for union with God. The witness of the Christians of the Middle East keeps the way to that longing for God open to all.

Amen.

His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem