

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, December 15, 2024**

The Third Sunday Of Advent (Gaudete)

**Festal Evensong**

4:00 pm

+

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Sean Semple, *Bishop of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf*

on

Isaiah 35; Luke 1:57-66

+

## St Thomas Evensong

I am not sure what you imagined that the Bishop of Cyprus and the Gulf would sound like, but it probably wasn't South African! A biblical image close to my heart is St John's description of the Holy Spirit as an unpredictable wind <sup>[1]</sup>, for the Spirit has blown my life and ministry from South Africa to Cyprus, to the UK, and then eventually back to Cyprus and the Gulf, as its 6th Bishop. I am honoured to have this opportunity to share a little of the story of how your Episcopalian brothers and sisters serve God at the turbulent crossroads of the world that is the Middle East.

When people hear of our Episcopal Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East they tend to hear "Jerusalem" and think that this is where the majority of Christians will be found. But there are, in fact, three Episcopalian Dioceses in the Middle East, one of which is the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf.

Cyprus and the Gulf has the distinction of being one of the largest Episcopalian dioceses in the world. In terms of numbers, It has 2 cathedrals, 3 time zones, encompasses 10 countries, and stretches 1000 miles across the Arabian Peninsular to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus.

We have churches in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen; as well as churches in countries with strong biblical connections: Iraq, the legendary location of the Garden of Eden and the site of the once-glorious Babylon; Oman from where tradition has it that the Magi collected their frankincense and myrrh; and finally the divided island of Cyprus – the birthplace of St Barnabas and location of St Paul and St Barnabas' first missionary journey <sup>[2]</sup>.

In the Gulf there are a surprising number of Christians. In Iraq there are around 250 000 indigenous Christians <sup>[3]</sup>. In the rest of the Gulf there are an estimated 4 million expatriate Christians employed as migrant workers <sup>[4]</sup>. This workforce is drawn from all over the world but mainly from the Indian Subcontinent, Africa, the Philippines, Europe and the US. In every country of the Diocese, our churches offer spiritual homes-from-home to transitory, multinational, multiracial populations, and although most of our services are conducted in English, one can also find services conducted in Urdu, Igbo, Tamil, and Arabic.

Many decades ago, generous and far-sighted Sultans, Emirs, and Sheikhs gave land in the Gulf for churches to be built on, which demonstrates the respect and toleration for Christianity most often

found there. We, in turn, do not violate local law or the generous hospitality of our host nations by attempting to convert Moslems to Christianity.

The land gifted to Christians was most often developed into ecumenical church compounds where today one might find a Coptic Orthodox, a Mar Thoma, and an Episcopalian Church side-by-side. These religious compounds are usually the only venues in Gulf countries where Christian activity can take place, and so those with church buildings rent space in their churches and halls to those who don't have their own worship space. As an example, Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Dubai has its own thriving congregation but each weekend it also hosts 80 church groups of different denominations that bring between 10 000 and 15 000 worshippers into the compound.

Our region is notoriously war-torn and unstable, and maintaining a hope-filled and caring Christian presence in places like Iraq and Yemen is a constant challenge. And yet with the support of international donors including The Episcopal Church we sponsor an eye-clinic in Aden, and a school and clinic at St George's Church in Baghdad. In Cyprus we minister impartially to both sides of the divided island and do what we can to support refugees and vulnerable migrants.

On this third Sunday in Advent, our readings focus on the ministry of the prophets – those who warned of God's judgment but also promised God's restoration.

In Cyprus and the Gulf our context requires us to exercise a ministry of prophetic presence rather than prophetic proclamation. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we make Christ known through our worship and moderate doctrines; through humanitarian projects and spiritual hospitality to those far from home; through culturally and racially integrated congregations, through respectful interfaith and ecumenical dialogue; through ethical living and good governance of our churches.

The Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf is an unusual diocese that does unusual ministry. It has been well-described as a hidden gem: we are not particularly well-known, but for the last 50 years we have held an Episcopalian Christian space in 10 countries in arguably the most turbulent region of the world!

We have our challenges: it is not always easy to recruit good clergy to this frontier diocese, and while a few of our parishes are well resourced, most are fragile and live a hand-to-mouth existence. And so we are extremely grateful for the portion of the Good Friday Offering that we have received for many years from The Episcopal Church. On many occasions, this support has enabled our diocese to survive existential threats.

If you are interested in hearing more about the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, I will be available after the service. We also have an online presence and a newly established American Friends of the Diocese that you would be most welcome to join.

In the prophet Isaiah's vision of a restored future, water breaks forth in the wilderness and streams flow in the desert. <sup>[5]</sup> Please remember your brothers and sisters in Christ that minister in the Middle East, and pray that through their faithful presence, the living water of Christ might break forth in the wilderness and flow in the desert. Amen.

The Rt Rev'd Sean Semple

Bishop in Cyprus and the Gulf

## References

---

- 1 John 3.8
  - 2 Acts 13
  - 3 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-03/christians-in-iraq-still-fearing-insecurity.html#:~:text=Iraqi%20Christians%20still%20victims%20of%20persecution%20In,million%20in%202003%20to%20about%20250%2C000%20today.>
  - 4 See <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2015/09/christianity-islam-saudi-arabia-uae-migrant-workers/#:~:text=But%20as%20a%20Christian%2C%20he,Christian%20when%20migrants%20are%20counted.>
  - 5 Isaiah 35.6
-