

HOLY WISDOM

ANCIENT AND MODERN HISTORY

In the year 998, Prince Vladimir of Kiev went to Constantinople and wrote home about the worship in the church of Hayia Sophie, saying -

'We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth ... Never have we seen such beauty ... we cannot describe it, but this much we can say, there God dwells among mankind'.

The first church on the site was built the 4th century, although the current building was begun in 512 by the Byzantine emperor, Justinian the Great – at the time the largest building in the world. On the day it was consecrated, Justinian entered through the main doors and declared - *'Solomon, I have surpassed thee!'*.

Forget St Peter's in Rome! For a thousand years, Hayia Sophia in Constantinople was the capital for Christendom until it fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

From then on, for 500 years, Hayia Sophie was a mosque, until 1934, when Kamal Attaturk, the secular founder of modern Turkey, made it into a museum and a monument for all humanity. A move which the current president – Recep Erdogan – describes as *'an act of treason'*. Last Friday, following extensive lobbying and a lengthy court case, the status quo was overturned and Hayia Sophie was returned to use as a mosque.

As you might expect, there was rejoicing amongst many Muslims in Turkey and beyond, and sorrow and anger from church leaders and especially Orthodox Christians everywhere.

The status of Hayia Sophie is an incredibly complex and toxic mix of religion and politics, that tests our ability to see things as others see them, and overcome our prejudices. After all, if Westminster Abbey were turned into a museum tomorrow – wouldn't *you* object? Wouldn't you want to see it restored as a sacred place for worship? The problem with Hayia Sophia is *whose worship?*

COMPETING NARRATIVES

Both Christians and Muslims have developed competing narratives to express their continuing claim over the building:

Orthodox Christians tell the story of the priest conducting the last liturgy in the church as the Ottoman armies stormed the city. He was seen walking towards a solid wall and disappeared. It is said that on the day the church is restored to Christian worship, he will reappear to finish the interrupted service, as if nothing had happened.

Muslims tell another story about the collapse of the dome in the 6th century. No-one could fix the structural problems until some monks travelled east and gathered earth from Mecca and saliva from the new-born prophet Mohammed. The earth and spit were mixed with the mortar, and the dome was rebuilt without any problems.

Absurd as these stories may seem, they testify to the nature of Hayia Sophie as a contested holy space, with competing narratives of spiritual ownership. Priority or length of use by any one religion cannot by itself be the deciding factor, or the cathedrals of Seville and Cordoba should be mosques again. Hayia Sophia is church AND mosque AND museum - all three - if not in equal measure, at least in some degree.

Recently, we have all become more aware of the past as disputed territory, and that when it comes to history, one perspective isn't definitive. Understanding the past means accepting the many-sided complexity of interweaving narratives, and that history isn't about the past – it shapes the present and future lives of us all.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

But why does any of this matter to us?

Why should you *care*?

Well, the last thing the world needs is increased tension between Christians and Muslims – what happens *there* has an effect *here*, and so we all need to understand the situation with as much generosity and knowledge as possible.

The current status quo of Hayia Sophie as a museum arose out of a complex situation following the First World War. The Christian population of Istanbul – almost all Greek Orthodox – moved to Greece as part of a political agreement. But the Ecumenical Patriarch, the spiritual leader of all Orthodox Christians, remained in his ancient home in the city, and so Istanbul and Hayia Sophie is the

spiritual home of millions of Eastern Orthodox Christians, as Canterbury Cathedral and St Peter's in Rome are to us as western Christians.

As a museum, with its strange juxtaposition of Byzantine Mosaics and Islamic calligraphy, Hagia Sophia testified to an older and more cosmopolitan city, one where Christians still had a place and a role. The ending of that status quo is part of a much longer story of separation and destruction of Christian history in Turkey and across the Middle East.

We should care that this ancient and holy place is being weaponised by the current leader of Turkey, who is desirous to maintain power by appealing to a conservative base. Throughout the country, other ancient Byzantine churches have also been converted from mosques to museums, the glorious mosaics disappeared from sight, some of them possibly destroyed. Very soon the land where St Paul founded the churches of Galatia, Ephesus and Colossae, and the heart of the Christian empire of Byzantium, will have no churches at all. Only one narrative will survive.

For all these reasons, the decision to restore Hagia Sophie as a mosque is deeply painful. It says to Eastern Christians, *'there is no place for you here, it's as if you were never here at all'*. Only Patriarch Bartholomew remains, the last link with the city's Byzantine and Christian past.

HOLY WISDOM NEW AND OLD

The great irony of all this is that it should take place, about a building whose name means 'Holy Wisdom'.

At one of the entrances to the building, you will see a Mosaic of Christ enthroned in majesty. Emperor Leo VI, often known as Leo the Wise, is shown prostrating himself in prayer before Christ – no matter how wise Leo was as a ruler, he knows that true wisdom is not of human origin but divine, and so he bows before the Holy Wisdom to which the building is dedicated.

If only the ruler of that same city today, could display such Holy wisdom!

In today's Gospel Our Lord says that:

'every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out from his treasure what is new and what is old'.

He is reminding us that the a wise person values what is old as well as what is new – one doesn't invalidate the other, they exist together, complementing each other.

It's often said that this verse – which doesn't fit neatly into the parables of the Kingdom - was important to Matthew because he saw it as applying to himself as he tried to understand his own Jewish heritage in the light of his new faith as a Christian.

Applying this to Hayia Sophie,
we must value ALL of its past, Christian and Muslim and even secular.
None of them negating the other,
None of them more important than the other,
Old and new together.