

The Therapeutic Community of Edessa

Week after week throughout the year, congregations of Orthodox Christians across world begin their celebration of the Divine Liturgy - the service of Communion - with the priests chanting these words: *'Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, both now, and ever, and unto ages of ages'*. The congregation - or choir or cantor on everyone's behalf - responds 'Amen' - *'so be it'*.

What exactly is the congregation expressing their agreement to in responding 'Amen'? Let us read the following words that Jesus Christ says about His Kingdom: *'Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world...'* John 18:36

Saint Paul also instructs the Christians of Rome by contrasting their lives with their surroundings: *'And do not conform to this world...'* Romans 12:2

Is the congregation saying 'Amen' at the very beginning of the Divine Liturgy to a concept of a world or an other-worldly condition which is at best something to hope for and that has nothing to do with the world in which they live? Is there any relation between the Kingdom that Christ proclaims and realises and the life of this world? And if so, what is the relationship?

To attempt to answer this, I want to invite you to come with me on a pilgrimage to the city of Edessa.

By the fifth century, the Syrian city of Edessa (now Şanlıurfa in Turkey) was a cosmopolitan, notable Christian centre that had reached a great height, not only commercially but also culturally and religiously, with Greek, Syriac and Armenian academies based there.

In Syriac - a dialect of Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus Christ - the word for *salvation* also means *life*, and therefore, it is not surprising that healing of body and soul is a dominant theme in Syriac literature. Indeed, the Eucharist - Holy Communion - is called *The Medicine of Life*, a medium of healing for both soul and body including community healing and healing through the community.

A community can suffer the exact same things that individuals suffer - hunger, injustice, oppression, disease and death. A community can suffer large-scale death in war or plague. Indeed, as we well know, the current virus is oppressing humanity's global community.

In terms of faith, there is interdependence between the individual and the faith community. The Church cannot exist without individual Christians, and as St. Paul emphasizes, it is not possible to be a Christian without being part of the Body of Christ - the Church:

'For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...For in fact the body is not one member but many...But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased ... But now indeed there are many members, yet one body...And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.' 1 Corinthians 12:12sq

There is therefore a connection between the suffering of the individual and the suffering of the community and likewise between the healing of the individual and the healing of the community

Two remarkable documents belong to that prosperous and luminous century in Edessa's history which are key to understanding how the city of Edessa perceived itself. Let us focus on one of these, namely *'The Teachings of Adai'*¹ - a document in which the healing of the individual and the healing of the city are key themes.

The Teachings of Adai profess the Apostolic foundation of the Edessa Christian Church, and recounts the story that Abgar², the sick king of Edessa sent for Christ, greeting him, very significantly, as *The Good Physician*, asking him to come to his city to heal him³. Although Jesus did not come to Edessa, the Holy Apostle Adai came there with his disciple Marish.

¹ *'The Teaching of Addai'*: from the Syriac original with an English translation, George Howard. Scholars Press, 1981]

² Abgar V, king between 4B.C. and 7A.D, and again from 13A.D. until 50A.D.

³ The story is told by the church historian Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea - well known for his *Ecclesiastical History* composed between 312 and 324.

In *The Teachings of Adai*, the Holy Apostle Adai is said to have been joyfully welcomed by King Abgar for bringing '*healing and salvation*' from Christ to the city. The first to be healed in Edessa is King Abgar himself and then Adai heals many in the city. The king calls the citizens together to hear the preaching of the Apostle Adai, who explains that these miracles of healing prove the truth of the Gospel he has been sent to preach. As a result of the miracles of healing, and the preaching of Adai, Edessa's men and women are baptized Christians.

From then on, what we see in Edessa under the leadership of Adai and with Abgar's patronage is the deliberate and systematic development of a Christian community that worshiped, taught, missioned and served. The *Teachings of Adai* describes a community that is faithful to the guidance given by the Apostle Adai on his deathbed, with the community demonstrating that faithfulness in its activities and preaching: '*All the men and women were modest, honourable, holy and pure ... they lived honourably in diligent service, relieving the burdens of the poor, and visiting the sick.*'⁴

'The very sight of them spread peace to those who beheld them ... For that which they said to others and admonished them to do, they showed by deeds the same thing in their own persons.' (ibid 103).

The miracles of healing individuals at the beginning of the history of the Christian Church in Edessa are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are part of creating healthy individuals and a healthy community that can be a means of healing, and which has a duty to be part of the task of creating a healthy society where there is not only careful and extensive provision for worship, but also a commitment from those who have been healed to bring healing to others in the community.

The theme of healing is evident in other Syrian literary works, for example, *The Odes of Solomon*⁵ from the second century AD, and the connection between worship and healing is prominent in the poems. We see the Christian standing and worshipping God with his body and soul, and this changes the worshiper, renewing him as he gives himself completely to God.

'My heart was lifted up and enriched in the love of the Most High,

⁴ '*The Teaching of Addai*' section 101

⁵ '*The Odes of Solomon*' James's translation. H. Charlesworth, Sheffield Academic Press 1977

*so that I might praise Him with my name.
My limbs were strengthened ...
Infirmities fled from my body,
And it stood [my body] firm for the Lord by His will.'* (Ode 8)

*'I lifted up my arms on high
on account of the compassion of the Lord.
And my helper lifted me up
According to His compassion and His salvation.
And I put off darkness
And put on light.
And I myself acquired limbs.
In them there was no sickness,
or affliction or suffering.'* (Ode 21)

The author of the *Odes* believes that God permeates our existence the more we give ourselves to Him in worship, and that His healing affects our body and the disposition of our nature, bringing us peace and rest.

The Odes of Solomon are very early Syrian writings. As the Christian community grows, the emphasis on the worship and healing of the community itself becomes a dominant theme, like in *The Teachings of Adai* as we have already seen, and so also in the writings of St. Aphrahat the Persian Sage (c 280-c345): *'Give rest to the weary, visit the sick, provide for the poor: this is indeed prayer'*.⁶

St. Aphrahat is so conscious of the individual's place in the body of the community, that he states that the believer needs to act to bring healing and comfort to others if he is to receive the healing and salvation of Christ.

In one of his hymns, the theological and literary 'giant', Saint Ephrem the Syrian, (c306-373) states -

*'Stamp your footprints with visiting the sick,
and let the image of your Lord be portrayed in your heart '*.⁷

⁶ *Demonstration 4 - 'On Prayer'*. English Translation in Sebastian P. Brock *The Syrian fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Cistercian Publications, 1987.

⁷ *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Virginity 2:15*. translation by Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*. Paulist Press, 1989.

Indeed, one of St. Ephrem's favourite themes is that Christ is the *Medicine of Life*.

In one sense, it is easy to ask how relevant to us today is the pattern and vision of Edessa's church life in the fifth century.

We may find the answer if we look at some of the principles that underpinned the vision and activity of the kingdom of Edessa following the conversion of King Abgar V.

King Abgar was convinced that he had received divine healing.

- ❖ The circumstances of adopting the Faith - the king's healing and the healing miracles performed by the one who had missioned to him, Saint Adai - convinced the community that healing was one of the essentials of the Christian Faith.
- ❖ They saw that there was a connection between the healing of the individual's body (to name one type of healing) and the 'body' of the Edessa community (namely the context of healing the king and the people).
- ❖ They believed that an integral part of their Faith was that the individual's healing called, qualified and empowered that individual to be a means of healing in and for the community.
- ❖ In addition to the integral connection between receiving and being a means of healing, the Syrian authors see a parallel and integral connection between worship and healing, and that worship, of course, includes the collective worship of the faith community.

Are not these principles underlying this 'Syrian' vision of the earliest centuries of Christianity equally as authentic for our contemporary society, and specifically for contemporary Wales? And does not the vitality of some of the most viable contemporary faith communities demonstrate that faith, prayer and the consuming longing for peace and justice and the struggle for them remain as central today as in fifth century Edessa? Perhaps we will have an opportunity to scrutinize this further.

+ Father Deiniol, Blaenau Ffestiniog

June 2021