

## ***Visit to Armenia***

Anyone with an interest in the history of Christianity ought to know something about one of the oldest churches of all - the Armenian Apostolic Church. Unfortunately, we in the West are largely ignorant of the fascinating and at times tragic story of Armenia. Alan and I have recently returned from a visit to that country, in which we learned a lot about the history and visited churches and monasteries.

Armenia lies on the neck of land between the Black and Caspian Seas and is surrounded by four countries - Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran. It has had the misfortune to be fought over and subjugated by succeeding waves of invaders during the last 3,000 years - Assyrians, Persians, Alexander the Great, Romans, Arabs, Seljuk Turks and Mongols.

It is amazing that the Armenian people have managed to keep their identity, rather than be absorbed into the ranks of the invaders. The reason for this is the phenomenon that had stimulated my curiosity and brought me to Armenia - the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Christianity was first brought to Armenia in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD by Saints Thaddeus and Bartholomew, two of Christ's apostles (hence the name of the Church). Then, at some time between 301 and 314, St. Gregory the Illuminator converted and baptized the King of Armenia and Christianity was adopted as the State Religion - even before that happened in Rome. This is perhaps the most important event in Armenian history, because the Armenian people are defined by their Church and together they have survived persecution and martyrdom - common occurrences in the life of the Nation.

100 years later, in 406, Mesrob Mashdotz invented the Armenian alphabet (quite unlike ours), so that the Holy Scriptures could become accessible to the people. This ushered in a period of intense development of the Church and culture. In Yerevan, the capital city, we visited the Matenadaran Museum of Manuscripts, purpose-built to house 14,000 Armenian illuminated manuscripts in controlled atmospheric conditions. Of course, only a small number are on display at

any one time - but what treasures! They are beautifully painted, like the medieval manuscripts with which we are familiar, but in a different style and using the Armenian alphabet, rather than Latin.

The purpose of these books was to aid worship and was intended to be displayed on the altar. There are a few surviving examples that predate the Arab conquest in 640. The subsequent suppression of Christianity by the Muslim invaders meant that artistic activity was suspended until the end of the Arab occupation in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. After that, the art flourished. The large number of manuscripts that have survived show how valuable they were considered to be and how closely they were guarded in times of danger. Most of them were saved by people fleeing the country in successive waves of the Armenian Diaspora. Many were unable to take any of their possessions with them, but they carried the manuscripts from their Churches to prevent their destruction. Since the building of the Museum, these manuscripts have been and are being returned, now that there is a place of safety for them. What an inspiring story!

We visited many churches and monasteries - some high in the mountains. We went in a minibus on hair-raising drives up hairpin bends like in Switzerland, but on dirt tracks - and no seat belts! It was terrifying at times, but well worth it for the views from the top. Those early Armenians certainly liked to site their monasteries in inaccessible places - understandable when you consider how often they were pillaged and destroyed over the centuries. Armenian churches have a distinctive style. There is always a cupola, pointed in shape, unlike the rounded ones with which we are more familiar. Inside, at the eastern end, there is a high, raised platform with steps leading up to it at the side. The altar table is there. The congregation stands in the main part of the church, as is the custom in other Orthodox Churches. There are some differences in theology between the two branches of the Byzantine tradition, concerning Christ's Divine and Human natures. The Armenian Apostolic Church belongs

to the group of Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox Churches, which includes the Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian and Indian Malabar Churches.

You can't visit Armenia without being aware of the strength of feeling which still exists about the Armenian Genocide, particularly that of 1915. This is not the place to go into details about the convoluted politics of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, in Tsarist Russian times, when half a million Armenians were massacred. Later, the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the German side and suffered a crushing defeat from the Russians, who were fighting on the Allied side. The Ottoman Turks became suspicious about the loyalty of their large Armenian population, who were Christian, like the Russians. In 1915, all able-bodied men were sent away with the army and were worked to death or massacred. The remaining people - women, children and old men - were uprooted from their villages and sent on a forced march, ostensibly for

*'resettlement'*, into the desert, where they died of starvation. At the same time, massacres were carried out in all the other regions of the Ottoman Empire. There is no doubt that one and a half million souls perished in the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. No Turkish government has ever accepted that these events happened.

In Yerevan there stands a wonderful new Cathedral, which was opened in 2001, to celebrate 1,700 years of Christianity in Armenia. It was paid for by funds sent from the people of the Diaspora from all over the world. Even those born overseas hold on to a strong feeling for their Armenian heritage and come on regular visits.

It was a positive experience for us to go to a country where the Christian Faith is still held to be of such importance. Perhaps what we need here in the West is a bit of persecution to stiffen our resolve!

***Frances Joyce***

