

Sermon by the Revd. Lee Shiu Keung at the Consecration of Alopen Chapel on 11th October 1963.

ALOPEN

In 635, Bishop Alopen arrived in Chang-An, after a long journey of “hardship and danger” across mountain and desert from Persia. The Nestorian Tablet expressly stated “The Emperor (Tai-Chung) sent the Minister of State, Duke Fang Hsuan-ling to take an escort to the Western suburbs to meet the guest and bring him to the Imperial Palace.” It is clear that Alopen’s mission had been carefully prepared and no doubt there had been Nestorian Christians in Chang-An before the arrival of Alopen. Trade still flourished between Persia and China in the 7th century and there must have been some Christians among the numerous Persian merchants in China.

Alopen was fully aware of China’s long literary tradition. He realized that he must present the Christian doctrine in the written language before he preached it to the people. The Emperor granted him the privilege of translating Christian books in the Imperial Library. The first book was completed in 638, after three years of arduous preparation. The Emperor, having examined its contents, gave his approval and commanded its propagation. A Nestorian Monastery known as the Persian Monastery was accordingly built. In the I-ning quarter at the capital with 21 men as regular monks.

The book which Alopen produced in 638 was the Sutra of Jesus the Messiah. It took the form of a catechism. The first part was devoted to an exposition of the Doctrine of God and the Ten Commandments. The second part was devoted to the Life of Christ from the Nativity to the Passion. The narrative, however, ended rather abruptly with the Crucifixion. Many Buddhist terms were borrowed in the Translation. There is every reason to believe that Alopen was dictating his book to a Chinese scribe who was a Buddhist or at least well-versed in the Buddhist scriptures. In 641 the second book appeared – the Sutra of the Messiah Doctrine on Charity. Again the book falls into two parts. The first part was devoted to an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (especially the 5th & 6th Chapters of St. Matthew’s Gospel) while the second part was a continuation of the Life of Christ from the Resurrection to the Ascension. Apparently Bishop

Alopen picked up the narrative where he had left unfinished in his first book.

Under Kao-Chung (650–683), the Nestorian Church prospered. According to the Nestorian Tablet “the religion has spread over ten provinces.....Monasteries occupied on hundred cities”. This is no doubt an exaggeration but the fact remains that foundations of Nestorian monasteries in Kansu and Honan had been traced to the second half of the 7th century.

In the reign of Kao-Chung, Alopen was made Archbishop or in the words of the Nestorian Tablet “Great Spiritual Lord, Protector of the Empire”. Although his Metropolitan See was still Chang-An, he had jurisdiction over monastic Churches in Kansu, Honan and even Szechuen.

We learn from the Nestorian Tablet that the early Christians in China had the two sacraments – Baptism and the Eucharist. Besides, the time-table of the Nestorian monks was regulated with the performance of the “Opus Dei”, the recital of the seven canonical hours.

The Nestorian Tablet mentioned that Bishop Alopen had not only brought books to Chang-An but also images. The Nestorian crosses may very well be included in the gifts. We do not know when the Nestorian cross on the pedestal of the lotus was first introduced. But the leaf-cross was very popular in Syria and Mesopotamia in the 7th and especially the 8th century. According to Dr. Talbot Rice, “this motif consists of a cross with tall stem, from the base of which leaves rise up to form a balancing pattern on either side”. We may perhaps, trace beginning of the lotus cross to the leaf-cross of Syria.

The lotus has always been the symbol of purity in China. But man by himself can never attain the perfection and the beauty of the lotus. To the cross of Christ he must lift up his heart. In the lotus-cross we find a great symbol that the Christian Faith had been planted on Chinese soil for more than thirteen hundred years ago. We who are worshipping in this Chapel have been blessed with a very rich inheritance.