Upside Down

‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also...’—Acts 17:6

In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the Romans and Jews who were in political and religious power at the time are accusing Paul, Silas and all the followers of Jesus of turning the world upside down. That is what happened over and again in the first centuries of Christianity. This new sect of Judaism, called Christianity, time and again, were called out as enemies of the state, of common order and decency; accused of turning the world upside down. This of course was not politically true. Jesus taught us by his own example not to pay back evil with evil, instructing us rather to love and forgive our enemies. Jesus avoided every invitation to political leadership, refusing to be crowned their king and insisting that his kingdom is not of this world. So the charges against Paul and Silas here, of threatening the state and common order were trumped up charges, the same as the trumped up charges that led to the torture and execution of our Lord Jesus Christ. But there was a way that the teaching of Christ and his Apostles, from 2000 years ago up until today, does indeed turn the world upside down, as well as the little world inside each of us, to this very day.

Let’s start with the big picture. The Gospel of Christ turns the world upside down by reversing the top down hierarchy of power, wealth and dominance which is hard wired in humans; be it in politics, economics, families or churches. Let’s look at the hierarchy in economics. On top are the trillions dollar nation states who spend hundreds of billions on their armies. Then there are the Forbes 500 richest individuals and corporations, the hundreds of billionaires and all their influence on governments, laws etc. Then the multi-millionaires, then the millionaire, then the white collar worker, then the blue collar one, then the poor, the disabled, the incarcerated. The lowest rung of course would have to be babies, they are completely devoid of power or money. This is the giant arrow which orders everything in our world, and it comes from the top down. Look at what a great difference there is between the billionaire World Casino CEO at the top of the pyramid and a little baby at the bottom. Yet, in Christ’s life and words he turns the world upside down. ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children,” says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, “you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 18:3) And in the Epistle of James we read; “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (Ja 2:5)” In his words and in the examples of his life, Jesus Christ turns the arrow of top down dominance upside down.

How Christ and his Apostles transformed the animalistic law of dominance in the world is clearer and more comfortable to see back in the past. I think it is harder to observe up close in the present. But I think we have an example of an effort to turn a corrupt world upside down right before our eyes, in the popular uprising in Armenia. The Republican party, Serzh Sargsyan and a group of Oligarchs ruled Armenia with a firm hand, from the top down for many years. Now the people of Armenia wish to turn this arrow of top-down dominance upside down; to claim a democracy, an open society where the voice of the people is also heard. Now we have to be careful here. Most people on the streets in Armenia don’t necessarily have the words of the Lord on their lips as they demonstrate, and following Jesus is a commitment much deeper than politics.

Yet many of the demonstrators do have Our Lord on their lips and on their hearts, I’ve seen many public prayers in following the events. And for those that don’t, here of course is the great opportunity for our church and our people. Because in order for any social movement to turn an evil system upside down toward the good, it’s participants must first repent, turn themselves around, and orient themselves to the good. You and me and every man and woman is a little world, and the good God can accomplish in the outer world, he chooses only to accomplish through our inner world, through each of us. So for Armenians and all Christians, following Christ-who is the ultimate good, beauty and truth- also leads to relative good, beauty and truth in this world; things like the dignity of democracy, the truth of free press, the humble work of public service.

So today I pray that we have the eyes to see how dedication to the way of Jesus has always resulted in turning the world upside down, from 2000 years ago up until the present day. I pray that each of us and each of the protestors in Armenia, have the faith and courage to first turn their own world upside down by following Christ, so that the larger systems and institutions of the world will be similarly transformed from within; now and always, amen.