

# Set The Prisoner Free!

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“In my country we go to prison first and then become President.” Nelson Mandela made this joke after he became president of South Africa, the same country which had imprisoned him unfairly for 27 years for his opposition to the racist government. Nikol Pashinian might appreciate this joke. In 2015, he finished a seven-year prison sentence in Armenia for his civil disobedience, but just last month was elected Prime Minister of Armenia. The irony of Mandela’s joke, of course, is that many heads of state end up in prison after they are corrupted by the power and trappings of their presidencies, while Mandela and Pashinian were imprisoned before.

Well today on the Feast of Holy Etchmiadzin, we are treated to both kinds of prison stories, and the paths of our two protagonists, Gregory the Illuminator and King Trdat, intersect. Trdat was a mighty and heavy-handed political leader who became imprisoned by his depravity, Gregory was first imprisoned for his convictions and later rose to become the great Patron Saint of all Armenians. Both stories offer powerful and relevant examples of the power of forgiveness to overcome injustice.

Let’s start with Trdat. Trdat was raised and groomed by the Roman super power of the day to rule one of its many vassal states. So when Trdat became king of the lands of Armenia, he owed his crown to the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Diocletian was famous for his persecutions of Christians throughout the empire, and so King Trdat followed his lead in harshly persecuting Christians in Armenia. One day Trdat comes upon a big surprise, however, when he finds out that a most trusted member of his own court, Gregory, was a Christian! Immediately he ordered him to renounce his faith or suffer the consequences. Gregory would not recant, and so Trdat throws Gregory in prison, Khor Virap, for 13 years to make an example of him.

Here begins Trdat’s fall and Gregory’s rise. For in the years that passed, while Gregory was imprisoned, Trdat’s wicked ambitions eventually catch up with him. He falls physically and mentally ill from the intrigue, the power politics and all the violence. He is literally confined, imprisoned in his own chambers, the doctors and nobles can do nothing to save his life and the life leaking out of their endangered kingdom. At the same time, Gregory languishes in prison for his 13th year—a hardship we could hardly even imagine. But somehow, in the darkness of utter despair, he seems to become stronger in his call. He sees more clearly that God has a plan for him, and through him, for Armenian people for generations to come. And meanwhile a glimmer of light comes unexpectedly to Trdat’s court. King Trdat’s own sister and wife become convinced that only the God of the Christians can deliver them from this evil. They secretly bring food to Gregory to keep him alive, and bring sanity to Trdat, convincing him to call off further killings and persecution of Christians.

We don’t know what it was like when Gregory took his first steps out of Khor Virap, greeted by the light and the profile of the awesome peaks of Ararat. We don’t know what it was like when Trdat first rose from his bed with the resolution to set things right. We do know what Nelson Mandela said his thoughts were as he emerged from his 27 year imprisonment in S. Africa. “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” We have heard the story of Gregory and Trdat so many times that it is easy to forget that Gregory and Trdat then, like Mandela and Pashinian now, faced a choice as they emerged from their cells. They had a choice whether to seek payback for years of confinement, for violence between their families which had gone back for years, for good health and family like stolen forever. Or, on the other hand, they could choose to leave the bitterness and hatred behind, to defiantly, powerfully, turn the other cheek and move forward.

St. Gregory and King Trdat choose forgiveness. Trdat takes off his crown, kneels before the very man he deprived of life for 13 years, and by him is baptized and receives new life in Christ. Their choice not only effects them, but begins a partnership that would transform Armenia forever into a people who would come to know God and thereby know themselves as a great and blessed people and culture.

And so today, on the Feast of Etchmiadzin, we remember our choice as heirs of Gregory and Trdat and followers of Christ—the great teacher, the great example and means of forgiveness. We all face daily choices, though perhaps less dramatic, of how we respond to injustice and suffering—however small. Today we remember that when we forgive we set a prisoner free, and then come to discover that the real prisoner was ourselves. May we seek the freedom of forgiveness always, the freedom found by Gregory and Trdat, sought by Mandela and Pashinian, and granted by the master of forgiveness Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, now and always; amen.