

Thirteenth Apostles

This weekend, in the Armenian Church sacred calendar, we celebrate the feast day of “The Twelve Holy Apostles of Christ and St. Paul, the Thirteenth Apostle.” We would do well to think of the twelve apostles on this day, it was their faith and sacrifice which extended the sacrifice of our Lord to all corners of the world, down through the generations, onto our day. But today we will focus not on the twelve Apostles but rather, as our calendar very provocatively puts it, “St. Paul, the Thirteenth Apostle.” Well isn’t that odd? Everyone knows that there were twelve Apostles, not thirteen. All twelve of these Apostles ate, drank and slept with Jesus; whereas Paul never met Jesus in the flesh. Why would our calendar call him the thirteenth Apostle? Well, maybe they just didn’t have another day to give Paul, so they lumped him in with the twelve Apostles. But that can’t be, because Paul actually does have a separate feast day he shares with St. Peter in late December. So clearly the compilers of our sacred calendar knew what they were doing in calling Paul the thirteenth Apostle. Today I want to show you how this title conferred on Paul, the ‘thirteenth apostle’, can motivate us all to be more committed followers of Christ today.

You see Paul, the thirteenth Apostle, is an approachable figure for all of us, because like us, Paul was not in Jesus’ inner-circle. In fact, worse than any of us, he actually spent his days persecuting the Apostles of Jesus and their followers before his conversion. Paul began so far away from our Lord and his inner circle of his Apostles, that his earning the honorary title of Thirteenth Apostle is nothing short of astonishing. Perhaps the best analogy in our time are people like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Both are Harvard university dropouts, who later become so distinguished in their fields that the same Harvard ended up granting them honorary degrees. Receiving the highest honor from the same group you rejected is a special accomplishment, usually the sign of genius, as all three of these men are in their respected field. And though the Apostle Paul was indeed a spiritual genius, he also remains the most approachable to believers. Because although none of us can become Apostles of Christ (this group is closed), any of us can still become honorary apostles-thirteenth apostles-like Paul. All it takes to do so is a share of Paul’s strong faith and hard work.

Paul, the thirteenth apostle, is the Apostle of strong faith because, as we mentioned, he is the only Apostle who did not live and work side by side with Jesus. Paul, like us, did not see Jesus with his own eyes, but rather through the eyes of faith. This is a great blessing according to Jesus himself. Recall when the Apostle Thomas did not believe in the resurrected Jesus until he saw him and touched him with his own hands. Jesus then admonished Thomas saying “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe (Jn 20:29).” Paul’s ministry was so effective because of the depth of his faith, which seemed to require little proof or positive reinforcement. To the contrary, for much of his life, Paul received only negative reinforcement in response to his efforts to preach his faith in Jesus Christ. As we read in Corinthians Paul reports, “[I have served Christ] with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; (2Cor 11:23-25).” Paul achieved the honor of the thirteenth apostle because his strong faith relied little on the temporary appearances of success, achievement and good fortune, but only on his mission to preach Christ, come what may. May we be granted a portion of Paul’s strong faith.

And to become thirteenth apostles, like Paul, we also need hard work. I am not sure how many of you follow professional basketball, but every year the NBA gives the “Sixth Man of the Year” award to the league’s best performing player coming off the bench as a substitute (or sixth man). The sixth man in basketball is always among the hardest working, because he’s coming off the bench and has something to prove because he’s not a ‘starter’. Paul, as the thirteenth Apostle, always seemed to work the hardest with something to prove to the first team of twelve apostles. Paul wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, more than any other writer. Paul traveled more than 10,000 miles (without airplane or car), started churches from Jerusalem to Spain and is largely responsible for spreading the Gospel of Christ to non-Jewish people. Some of the other Apostles seemed more comfortable staying put and preaching to their own. Paul achieved the honor of the thirteenth apostle because he worked harder than anyone to live and teach the life of Christ.

So today on the feast of “The Twelve Holy Apostles of Christ and St. Paul, the Thirteenth Apostle,” let us recall the faith and service of all the original followers of Christ who have spread and passed on our faith from generation to generation. But let us take special heed of the Apostle Paul, who like us, did not actually see our Lord, yet we believe. Like Paul, let us take nothing for granted in our status before Christ, relying only on our undying faith and dogged determination, so that we too might be considered in some way ‘Thirteenth Apostles’ of Christ; now and always, amen.