

TURNING POINTS

Life is full of turning points and so are our Holy Scriptures. There are always points in life where you might have gone one way or the other, and in choosing, things were never the same again. Or, as is often the case, we don't choose events—sometimes events chose us.

Alfred Nobel had one such turning point. His brother Ludwig had died, but a reporter thought it was Alfred who died and wrote an obituary about Alfred instead of his brother. Imagine Alfred's surprise when he woke up the next morning and read his own obituary. When he was finished reading, he was even more shocked. The obituary was titled 'The merchant of death is dead.' Nobel had invented dynamite, but he saw all its great potential for construction; such as blasting holes for solid bridge footings and blasting rock to connect people with roads and tunnels. His invention, however, was also being used for war and destruction. And by the pen of this obituary writer, Alfred Nobel's legacy was as the inventor of a weapon of mass destruction. Shocked by this portrayal, Alfred Nobel turned his life efforts to creating the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to those who dedicate their lives to peace. Reading his own obituary was Nobel's turning point.

We also have two such dramatic turning points in today's scripture readings. In our gospel reading, the Apostles had a clear turning point when they were caught in a great storm on their tiny boat. In facing the end of their lives, they paradoxically have found a new beginning... discerning Jesus' presence coming towards them through the darkness. In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we see a turning point for all of God's people. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me," proclaims Isaiah, "because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn (Is 61.1-2)." Please understand the history here. Isaiah is speaking to a Hebrew people decimated by genocide, scattered in foreign lands and fighting amongst themselves about who was ethnically and religiously pure. Isaiah is casting a vision, reminding the people of Israel that good is ahead and God's love is boundless if they put God first and seize this turning point.

We are all given turning points as individuals and as a community, sometimes these are dramatic, but often they are only noticeable in hindsight. I think that we at St. Hagop might discern a turning point in the challenge our new Primate gave us two weeks ago; echoing the challenge of the prophet Isaiah; 'it is time for the church to be the church.' It is time to put aside the distractions, the diversions, all we do to entertain, educate and edify and instead put first things first. Araj Asdvadz, in doing this we might end up not only entertaining, educating and edifying, but by God's grace transforming people's very lives.

Our Primate did not leave us with many details of how the church is to be a church, to do what only we can do. But today on the day of our parish assembly, with the help of Isaiah and leaning on our own experience, we can fill in some details. The whole world is looking for fulfillment and purpose in their lives to be a part of something bigger. But the church, and only the church, is the place where the Spirit of the Lord chooses to dwell in and among his people gathered, receiving the grace of God which fills all voids and fulfills all lives. The whole world seems to be suffering from slavery to anxieties, addictions sins and shames. The church and only the church says that we are a hospitable for souls, with the medicine of the Holy Scriptures and prayer, and the power of our presence to each other which "binds the brokenhearted, frees the captive and releases prisoners." The whole world wants to be special and loved in the eyes of God and in the eyes of others. The church and only the church reaches out to those isolated and shut-in, because of age or poverty or sickness, and proclaims God's special favor on the lonely, the downtrodden and the afflicted.

Today let us recognize that a great challenge has been given to us at St. Hagop, a great turning point to bring about Christ's presence in the world by being his church. How will we, in the years ahead fulfill our great opportunity, our vocation, to be Christ's healing, reconciling Body to each other and to those whom God has brought us to serve? How can each of us as members of St. Hagop Armenian Church, help realize a turning point where our church can truly be the church? As we ponder these questions let us carry in our hearts the prophet's words; the Spirit of the Lord is here even now among our people and we have been anointed, in Christ, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and to set all captives free; now and always; amen.