

PEOPLE OF THE WAY

“Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.” Acts 9:1-3

What is the proper name of our church community? Is it St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Church? Is it St. Hagop Armenian Orthodox Church? Or should we cover all bases and say St. Hagop Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church? If that seems complicated for you, today’s reading provides some shorter and older alternatives. In the Acts of the Apostles we see the two oldest names for St. Hagop, as well as any and every community dedicated to following Our Lord Jesus Christ. Any guesses? Well, the second oldest name for people of our faith is “Christians,” as found in Acts 11, where it is written that in Antioch the faithful first were called “Christians.” Well, so what were Christians called before that? Any guesses? The oldest name for Christians, found in the reading chosen for today, is simply people of “The Way.”

People of “The Way” is a broad and mysterious name, but what do you think it meant specifically then and what do you think it means for us today? Today’s reading about the conversion story of Saul will give us an excellent illustration of the way, but we can start with what the name probably originated from, likely a few of Jesus’ teachings which alluded to “The Way.” For example, recall Jesus’ teaching about two ways to live life; the broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life. (Mt 7:13-14) So the way is a chosen moral way to live which is better than the average way. More essentially though, recall Jesus’ most astounding claim that he himself is The Way, The Truth and The Life, and the only way to come to know God the Father. (Jn 14:6) For Christians then, the way is not merely embracing a good and truthful life, but being embraced by the incarnate God who is goodness truth and life.

This is a huge distinction which changed the course of history, and continues to change the course of many individual lives. In today’s reading, we meet the great prototype of the man who dramatically turned from his ways, to The Way, and set the template for all conversions thereafter. We read of a pious Jew and great seeker of the good and true named Saul, who nonetheless was a leading persecutor of the early Christians. Everything changes though, when Saul draws near to Damascus with the intent to further persecute these followers of “the way.” He is struck by a heavenly light and addressed by a heavenly voice which belongs to none other than Jesus himself. Paul was raised and educated by Pharisees, taught to seek and learn the truth for his entire life. But it is only when he encounters the Truth himself, Jesus, that he undergoes the great conversion that will be read, embodied and repeated millions of times thereafter in the church of Christ. The way is not a method we master, it is a mystery that master us.

The way is also not a faith that just stays in your head or allows you to stay in your home or sheltered community. It is a way on which we are sent, as also happens to Saul. Struck down on his knees, Jesus gives instructions to Saul about the new way he will go, instructions which are specific but also very open-ended. Go into the city, Jesus says, and there you will discover what you need to do. Saul’s conversion isn’t in his head, and it isn’t even turning away from what he did wrong. More than converted, he is called, commissioned to walk in a new “Way.” This is the joyful adventure of a committed Christian life that is open to all of us. Where God calls us each of us specifically, but open-endedly to work on his behalf in the world—to go out from where we might be stuck and strike out on the way that leads to abundant life.

This then, is perhaps why “The Way” is such a powerful name for the Christian community. Instead of being identified by a set of beliefs or morals, or a hierarchy, or an ethnic group, our faith communities will always be known first and foremost by our character in the world and whose character we reflect. This was the great way which transformed the spiteful Pharisee Saul to the amazing Apostle Paul. This is the way that has the power to inspire and transform the lives of all God’s people here at St. Hagop Armenian Church, and in every corner of the world where people endeavor to follow him who is the Way, now and always; amen.