

# The Smell of an Apostle

*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us...We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. —1 John 1:1-4*

Growing up in St. James Armenian Church in Watertown, MA, those of us who went to Sunday School looked forward to our Senior year. Not only because it was the end of Sunday School, but because the Senior class teacher was the larger than life Fr. Dajad Davidian of blessed memory. Fr. Arsen would celebrate Badarak, which left Fr. Dajad free to teach us. And anyone who has taken a class with Fr. Dajad, be it Sunday School or graduate courses in Etchmiadzin, knows his curriculum. Fr. Dajad basically just told colorful stories about his life. That's one reason we looked forward to the class, and the other reason was because once a month, we would visit another house of worship in the greater Boston area. The idea behind this was that you can't really know your own church and faith until you step outside it to visit others, an approach that in my life has been proven true time and again.

The first trip we made to the Baptist church in Watertown particularly instructive and relevant to today's reading and sermon. When we entered, I was struck by the bareness of the place. There were no icons or vestments, no incense and very little singing; there was no bowing, crossing or kissing, and on this day at least, there wasn't even communion. There was, however, a long but engaging sermon delivered by the pastor from a raised pulpit, parts of which I remember now, thirty years later. What I learned then, but would find words to describe only later, was that this reformed Protestant church focused almost exclusively on knowing about God through the mind, through the words and ideas of Scriptures and the pastor.

Our church, on the other hand, does some speaking and thinking during worship, but also engages all of the senses when encountering God. We do a lot of thinking about God, but we also see the heavens in the golden blaze of priestly vestments and icons. We smell incense which rises along with our prayers to God. We sing the entire liturgy, to pull the heart strings to God's beauty. We taste of God's body and blood. Moreover, we are often doing things as we worship; lighting candles, kissing crosses and each other, signing the cross, bowing and standing in prayer. Since God created us with physical bodies and sense, we eastern Christians believe He desires that we use our bodies and senses to grow closer to Him.

This is where today's epistle reading from 1 John comes in. John reiterates that the good news of Jesus' coming is not some abstract idea we learn about. John says about Jesus "we declare to you, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it." For John, as for us, encountering God is not just mental, it is a total sensory experience (and beyond). And with the coming of Christ into the world God became embodied, personal and knowable-to our senses, our emotions, our taste and touch-just as much as to our brains. In this way, our church helps rebalance the Western Christian approach of knowing God only through mind and belief, which taken to the extreme, leads to head-only, disembodied and unapplied Christian lives, rather than whole selves, whole lives offered to God.

John's epistle also reminds us of the deepest reason we call ourselves an Apostolic Church. This name is batted about by Armenians, but we seldom reflect on what it actually means. It means that, like the Apostle John, we are to have a first-hand encounter with Jesus that engages all our senses, our entire heart, and informs our entire lives, and share that with those around us in joyful fellowship. The scriptures, our services, our theology are important ways of knowing about Jesus, but their end is helping us know of Jesus-directly-like his Apostles. What was said of the early church can still be true for us today; that Sacred Scripture was "written on the heart of the Church rather than on parchment." That is, the most important aspect of our faith is not passed through word and thought, but by a communal living tradition that is caught more than taught. Where people join our church and follow Christ because you and I think, speak and act like we follow Christ. They smell, taste and hear Christ when they come into contact with us.

This a lofty call, and starting with me first, we have a long way to go to achieve this high Apostolic calling. Yet as the years go by I see that, by the grace of God, St. Hagop continues to grow into that church which God has called us to be, an Apostolic church who has heard, seen, smelled and tasted that the Lord is good and shares this with others "so that our joy may be complete," now and always; amen.