

Bridge Out Ahead

An Armenian priest and an evangelical pastor from local parishes were standing by the side of the road holding up signs. The pastor's sign read, "The End is Near!" Opposite him, the Der Hayr's sign read, "Turn before it's too late!" They planned to hold up their signs to each passing car. "Get a job." The first driver yelled. Right behind him a second driver passed; "Leave us alone, you religious freaks"! Suddenly, from around the curve, they heard screeching tires and a splash followed by more screeching tires and another splash. The Der Hayr looked to the pastor and said, "Maybe a 'Bridge Out Ahead' sign would have been more effective."

In today's Gospel reading and in the events of today's feast of the Holy Cross of Varak, our church continues to hold up signs for its people. Like those driving along their way in our joke, we would all be better off now and later if we heeded these signs. But unlike the foolish priest and pastor, our Lord doesn't just give us warnings, he has laid down himself as the bridge between a broken creation and our final home in heaven.

Let's start with the warning signs. In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, and many places elsewhere in the Bible, the prophets of God warn that not following God's way is its own punishment. Our church's equivalent of the 'turn before it's too late' sign, is our whole theology and sacrament of repentance, which in its very roots means to 'turn around.' That's what today's reading from the end of Matthew's Gospel urges, and what John the Baptist warns in its very beginning; "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Though none of us like to hear it, to live a good life, it is necessary to be reminded that the end is near; that we are living on borrowed time and that we are stewards not owners of all we have. The consequence of not heeding these signs are dire. It leads to living a lie, the lies that we are self-made men and women, that our life is in our own hands and we alone are at the wheel in deciding how our lives go. When inevitably the end does come in site, be that the end of a job, of a marriage, of our health or of our life, the rug is pulled out from under us and we suffer greatly. I see it all the time in big ways as a priest, and I experience it all the time in smaller ways as a person. To experience joy in my life, I know I need every day reminders that I am not my own end. Otherwise I enslave myself to whatever idols I set up in God's place; the god of people-pleasing, the god of being right, the god of control.

So thank the Lord for his warning signs, for his prophetic signs in the Bible and in our lives that help us keep our sights fixed on what is best for us. But alas, God's signs are not merely signs of warning, flashed from a safe distance. Like those pastors in the joke, sinner that I am, I might stand by as you drive yourself into a lake, but God would not. For God's greatest prophetic sign to the world, was also the greatest sign of love that the world has ever seen, the sign of the cross he bore for you and for me.

By this special sign, God does not just flash warnings to us from the side of the road of danger ahead. He has entered into the road, into history in order to fully understand how hard it is for fragile human beings to keep our eyes fixed on the way. The sign of Jesus and his cross is so powerful that it isn't just outside us, but penetrates within us and sustains us, from our baptismal birth into the church, till our exit out of it, and every Sunday in between. Such that, when we make the sign of the cross, we are reorienting ourselves on our way, focused with all mind, heart and strength on Him. And we aren't just guided by the cross as individuals, but also as a community. That's why the Armenian church has an entire season of the year dedicated to the cross, and why we celebrate the Holy Cross of Varak today. For time and again, the cross has appeared as a sign of hope to a persecuted people, that we might never forget God's enduring love.

Indeed, the cross is the ultimate sign for Armenian Christians. It is a sign that warns of trouble ahead, which we ignore at our own peril. But today's gospel reading and the feast of Varak reminds us of the full significance of the cross, that it is God's most powerful sign of love, that beckons to us, and through us, that heaven is ahead. And lest we despair that we have no way to cross from where we are to where He is, Christ has laid himself down as a bridge. So that even though the end be near, the Lord is nearer still; now and always and unto the ages of ages amen.