

GOOD SOLDIERS

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. -2 Tim 2:3

This past week, our church's sacred calendar brings before us the life of soldier saint St. Gevorg/George, who applied the discipline, courage and sacrifice of soldiering to the Christian faith. Tragically in this same week, Azerbaijan-with the full support of Turkey-has attacked Artsakh, and the lives of many brave Armenian soldiers have been brought before us. Yn. Anna is keeping in close contact with her family whose son is an officer in defense of Armenia and Artsakh. We have been in contact with Armenian Army Lieutenant Colonel Armen Zakaryan, senior representative to CENTCOM at MacDill air force base, and have asked him to speak to us after church about the crucial situation in Artsakh & Armenia. And most poignantly, the souls of the now over two hundred young men who have given their lives in defense of Artsakh have been before us in prayers this week, and will be again today in our hokehankist for them. So both our sacred calendar and our personal calendars move me to preach today about soldiers and what sets them most apart; namely, their exceptional calling to endure all trials, even unto death, for a cause that is greater than them.

Soldiers remind us that some things in this life are worth fighting for, wholeheartedly. United States soldiers have fought for freedom of conscience for Americans and-when at our best-for others around the world. Armenian soldiers have fought for the protection of our endangered homeland and heritage-and at this very moment-are putting their lives on the line to repel Turkish-backed Azeri incursions into Nagorno-Karabakh.

Soldiers are special for sure, but their calling to endure great hardship, even unto death, for something greater than them, is the calling of you and I and every Christian. 'You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ,' writes Timothy in his second epistle. Being a soldier of Jesus is easy to spiritualize and keep as some abstract belief. But good soldiers in the US and in Armenia remind us that-in fighting for a greater cause-the sacrifices as well as the ensuing glory-are very real. Though most of us will never physically go on the battle field to make these sacrifices, nonetheless our scriptures remind us that all of life is a battle with our enemy- and though mortally wounded-the evil one still threatens us. As one man put it succinctly, 'a Christian without affliction is only like a soldier on parade (Felix Neff).' We Christians are always in battle, so clear today with the afflictions of pandemic, societal divisions and war in Armenian homelands. These are not times to be a soldier in a parade, or in our minds, with no sacrifice. These are time to get our hands dirty, fighting the good fight in any way we can.

We are called to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ, enlisted in His army, and what that means specifically for you or me varies as greatly as people vary in their diverse callings for God. Some soldiers will be called to actually protect and defend in this world; and to them we are extremely grateful. Most of us Christians, however, are not called on to the battlefield to be fighters, but perhaps called to be more like medics or chaplains. That's what Pope Francis meant when he said 'I see the church as a field hospital after battle.' St. Hagop is to be, first and foremost, like a field hospital and we its staff, doctors, nurses and chaplains. For the war which is life rages. It is an everyday battle simply to live as an upright Christian and pray for all including our enemies. But there are also once-in-a-lifetime battles like the defense of Artsakh and Armenia, in which we are called to help in any way we can. Please look in your bulletins and into your hearts and be sacrificial in donating, advocating and praying constantly that peace reign and the enemy be defeated.

For we always have been like a field hospital after battle at St. Hagop, bearing and healing each other's wounds and the wounds of those in great need. We sent aid to those who needed it during the violence in Syrian. We come to each others' aid when one falls ill or has lost a dear one. We give of ourselves-to other people and our church-not just a little here and there-but with sacrifice, like a soldier, giving with our whole self. It reminds me of the soldier who was approached on his cot by a chaplain. "You have lost an arm in the great cause," said the chaplain. "No," said the soldier with a smile. "I didn't lose it--I gave it." In that same way, Jesus did not lose His life. He gave it purposefully. He gave his life so that we might be saved, and we are to do the same for others in turn.

We are called to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. We must stay in the battle and man the field hospital of St. Hagop that has been entrusted to us. With the weapons of faith, hope and love we can give deeply of ourselves and our

possessions to help bind the wounds of those afflicted and disarm our enemy. Today the need is great in Armenia, let us do anything we can to help. For in this way, we too might someday be celebrated as veterans, soldiers of our Christian faith like Soorp Gevorg, honored alongside all those who, like Our Lord, gave their lives so that all might live abundantly, now and always; amen.