

Nersess the Greathearted

“I desire mercy not sacrifice.” --Matthew 12:7

Եթե Գրիգոր Ա Լուսավորիչը համարվում է «Լուսավորիչ հոգևոց»՝ հավատի լույսը տարածելու, Սահակ Ա Պարթևը՝ «Լուսավորիչ մտաց»՝ հայ դպրության հիմնադրման եւ զարգացման, ապա Ներսես Ա Մեծը՝ «Լուսավորիչ սրտից»՝ բարոյական եւ կրոն. բարեկարգության նոր շրջանի սկզբնավորման համար:

If Gregory the Illuminator is known as the illuminator of souls—for spreading the light of faith; Sahag Barteve the illuminator of minds—for establishing and developing Armenian letters; then Nersess the Great is the illuminator of hearts—for instituting a new era of ethical and religious reform. (K'ristonya Hayastan : hanragitaran)

We celebrate St. Nersess the Great's feast day this weekend. As a saint, he wasn't foremost a great thinker or teacher of God's word, for that is relatively easy. He was instead a great doer of God's word; that is rare and blessed, and why we call him great. Indeed, St. Nersess the Great was a great doer of God's word, including today's assigned reading, which reveals a key tenet of God's covenant with mankind; “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” We have talked before about what this means. But the great thing about the Saints, is that we can see the ultimate meaning of God's words as applied in the life they lived. You see, Nersess had everything going for him. He had the education and connections from the dominant Greek culture in Caesarea. He rose up through the ranks of military and government. He was the great-grandson of St. Gregory the Illuminator, an heir to Armenia's most exalted lineage.

But nonetheless, when royal magnates who held council with the king advised the king to persuade St. Nersess to become the spiritual leader of Armenia, he refused. Certainly this was out of humility, but not only this. Nersess perhaps knew the passage from Samuel which says, “For the Lord does not see as people see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” Nersess did not care for the approval of rich and powerful people, nor for the trappings of the office of Catholicos, he cared only what God willed and saw in his heart. Only after some time, and the repeated invitations of the King, did Nersess discern his call to serve. In short order, he was ordained deacon, then priest, and ultimately chief bishop by Archbishop Eusebius of Caesarea in 353 A.D.

The Armenia king and leaders of the church would have many opportunities to regret this. For when the new Catholicos Nersess ascended to the Throne of St. Gregory, he did not forget God's word, but made it his oath. He rebuffed vested powers in politics and religion, to reform the church into a servant and defender of the people—especially for the weak and dispossessed. He built schools and orphanages; hospitals and shelters for the poor; monasteries and convents. At the bishops' council of Ashdishad, which Nersess convened in A.D. 364, he instituted reforms in the church canons that placed Christian charity, moral cleanliness, sincere worship, marriage and childrearing at the heart of religious observance.

Nersess was also outspoken in defiance of Armenia's impious leaders—and his unwavering moral integrity came at great cost. He was deposed from office; exiled from his homeland; eventually poisoned at the order of a depraved king. Nevertheless, his example of holiness and virtue left a lasting impression on the Armenian Church and people, who saw fit to canonize the reluctant Catholicos, and name him “Nersess the Great.”

Where Gregory the Illuminator is known as the illuminator of souls and St. Sahag Barteve the illuminator of minds—Nersess the Great is the illuminator of hearts—for in his life he shed light on the heart of God—who above all things—‘desires mercy not sacrifice.’ This weekend, let us let us dedicate ourselves to doing the same, emulating in our good and kind works for others, the great heart of Nersess the Great, now and always...amen.

—Excerpts taken from ‘Armenia's Saint of Compassion’ in eNewsletter of the Eastern Diocese