

BEANS & SEEDS

A Sermon for the Service of Washing of Feet 2018

During the forty days of Great Lent, as many of you know and some of you have practiced, it is our tradition to abstain from all animal products, eating only vegetables. Each year I attempt this, I end of eating lots of lentils, beans, and seeds and also find myself going online to read about the nutritional benefits of all these legumes. In my searches, what I didn't expect was to find that our Armenian Church fathers and mothers, 1000 years ago, had some interesting things to say about beans and seeds; not just their nutritional value, but their spiritual value as well. Back then you see, they saw everything in creation, including beans and seeds, as reflecting some part of the nature of God.

So what is the spiritual value of a bean or seed? The 12th century Armenian Church father Mkhitar Gosh tells a story of a little argument between beans and seeds which illustrates something essential in our spiritual life, then and now, and is especially relevant to our Washing of the Feet ceremony today.

The bean and the chickpea were bragging about their large size to the tiny linseed and sesame seed. The little seeds replied saying: "Well, we may be small in size, but we're very powerful. We provide nutrition and a source of light to the impoverished, whereas you provide little nourishment and no source of light."

In our time, with electric light, and cheap sources of protein, it's hard to imagine what the sesame seed meant for poor peasants. It grows anywhere, in drought and monsoon. It is a great source of protein for those who can't afford meat. It has the highest oil content among seeds, which meant you could use its oil for lamps, your only source of light. This tiny seed has had great benefit for humankind.

And Gosh is making an analogy of course, saying that beans and seeds are like people. Big and strong beans and seeds, like big and strong people, often use their power to push around the weak and small. But Gosh in his fable, and Jesus in his example of the washing of feet, remind us that really it is the small and humble people, the small and humble seeds, which are the most powerful.

Remember what was happening around Jesus. His biggest and strongest disciples James, John and Peter were always competing for power and leadership, bragging and "Lording it over" the others. Jesus insisted, however, that for Christians it is not the biggest and strongest who are greatest, "but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant (Mt 20:26)." And as always, Jesus lived by what he said. Jesus, the Son of God, humbled himself to wash his student's feet, then allowed himself to be betrayed and denied, and then gave himself as a sacrifice for the uplift of mankind.

Jesus, Mkhitar Gosh might say, became the smallest, most powerful seed. He made himself small, yet the entire world, especially the down trodden, are fed by him. He allowed himself to be crushed, so that he might provide light as a candle, consuming himself so that others might see the way.

Today in this ceremony of the washing of feet, we are asked to participate and model in our lives the great spiritual truth that Jesus and Gosh taught. Rather than puff ourselves up and control others

with our power, let us make ourselves small so that the power of God might grow as a seed within us, sustaining us and lighting our way, even as we do the same for others; now and always; amen.