

Synaxis of St. John the Baptist 2007

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
delivered on January 7, 2007

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today the Church celebrates the memory of St. John the Baptist in conjunction with the feast of the Theophany of the Lord. This is not the only day which the church remembers for St. John, in fact, there are lesser days dedicated in to his memory throughout the year (Birth, Conception, Beheading, Finding of the his head). He has been considered such an important saint that his icon adorns many traditional icon screens (as it does at St. Mary's), and his memory is kept in the liturgy of preparation as an equal to the angels, above the prophets in rank. In a sense, after the Theotokos he is the greatest of the saints of Christ.

The figure of John the Baptist runs throughout the New Testament. He is called the greatest of the Prophets, the second coming of Elijah, the greatest man born of a woman (gyne-meaning wife, as opposed to parthenos, virgin). Even Christ testifies of St. John the Baptist with unique words:

¹¹“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹²“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³“For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴“And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

[We should note that the phrase here “he who is least” can be translated as “younger,” which would refer to Christ Himself. But it is also true that all those united to Christ thus share the same inheritance in the Kingdom of heaven.]

The birth of St. John was accompanied by miracles, and his own father was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied concerning his son:

⁷⁶ “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest;
⁷⁷ For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways,
To give knowledge of salvation to His people
By the remission of their sins,
⁷⁸ Through the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us;
⁷⁹ To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

So, here we have a complex character: a prophet, a desert dweller, a wild man. The picture of him that we receive seems almost frightening (Matt. 3):

¹In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” ³For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.’ ” ⁴And John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Yet St. John is not an isolated hermit, who seeks spiritual enlightenment for its own sake, but is a man of destiny. He is unafraid to speak the truth to those in authority, to call them a “brood of vipers,” to challenge King Herod for his illicit marriage, which will cost him his life. Luke 3:

⁷Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸“Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. ⁹“And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

We see here a man whose tongue is sharper than any two-edge sword because He speaks the word of God. But St. John is no madman, overcome by wrathful passions, as he is often depicted in modern films. He is superbly sensible, down-to-earth, rational. His teaching on repentance is simple, practical, ethical:

¹⁰So the people asked him, saying, “What shall we do then?” ¹¹He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.” ¹²Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” ¹³And he said to them, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.” ¹⁴Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, “And what shall we do?” So he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages. (Luke 3)

John the Baptist was an image of the Desert Father even before there was such a thing. He is indeed the prototype of the monastic and angelic life. He is meek and gentle. When he discusses the Messiah, he is absolutely reverent, serene. His tone is gentle, and we see a whole other side of his personality: (John 3)

²⁷John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’ ²⁹“He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰“He must increase, but I must decrease.

As a true desert dweller John is profoundly real, profoundly humble, because he has no illusions about his own character. And when he encounters the Lamb of God, he himself

¹¹“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²“His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴And John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

When the time came for the Lord to face his Passion in Jerusalem, and to suffer the tests and taunts of unbelievers, it was to St. John the Baptist that he would appeal to silence their arrogant questions:

Matthew 21: ²³Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” ²⁴But Jesus answered and said to them, “I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: ²⁵“The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?” And they reasoned among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ ²⁶“But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet.” ²⁷So they answered Jesus and said, “We do not know.” And He said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things...Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. ³²“For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what more do we need to say or hear? Let us receive the testimony of St. John the Baptist and heed his words, that we might have the light of Christ shine in our hearts. Let us see in the Forerunner an image of our humanity as God would have it, for who among men has God ever praised as highly?

Let us seek to be simple, humble, meek upon the earth. Let us also seek to be strong, determined, and truth in our faith. Let us be filled with joy, knowing that we have received the bridegroom, our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!