

January 8, 2012

# Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young  
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday after Theophany, January 8, 2012

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

Two days ago, on Friday, we had the great Feast of the Theophany. Then the next day, yesterday, was the Feast of the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist. His feast follows directly after Theophany because, second only to Christ, he was a main figure in this tremendous event, the Baptism of the Lord and the full revelation of the Holy Trinity at the River Jordan.

I have often said that although we have icons of St. John the Baptist on our icon screens in churches, and we often name children after this important saint, and he has no fewer than seven feast days during the Church year, we actually don't talk about him as much as we ought and the average Orthodox Christian doesn't know as much about him as he should. Yet, even the Lord Himself gave him a place of great importance, by saying that he was "the greatest man born of woman". So, in church hymnology, St. John is called a "bright morning star," whose gleaming outshone the brilliance of all the other stars, announcing the coming dawn of the day of grace, illumined with the light of the spiritual Sun, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore this morning, the day following St. John's Feast, I would like to take some time explaining more about this wonderful saint.

St. John was the son of the Prophet and Temple Priest, Zachariah, and Elizabeth, who was a cousin of the Virgin Mary. He is called the "Forerunner" as well as the "Baptist." He is known as the Forerunner because he preceded Christ and taught repentance, which prepared men for Jesus' teaching and His ministry. Further, St. John recognized Christ as the Messiah as early as when they were both still in their mothers' wombs. According to Scripture, the Virgin Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth and, when they embraced, John leapt in his mother's womb at meeting the Lord—this was his first acknowledgment of Christ as Messiah. It is also one of the many reasons why Christians may not practice abortion since this biblical incident testifies that a child in the womb is already a fully complete human being, with spiritual consciousness and awareness.

When St. John was a bit more than 6 months old, his father Zachariah, who was a priest in the great Temple of Jerusalem, was murdered in the temple. This was at the time when Herod ordered the slaughter of all boy babies, but Zachariah refused to divulge the location of his son, who had been taken into hiding. St. John and his mother were in the desert where they remained and he was raised as an ascetic from the very beginning of his childhood, eating plants and roots and wearing rough clothing. He was a complete vegetarian, and drank no wine. As an

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adult, he baptized people in the Jordan, teaching repentance, but also clearly telling everyone that someone greater would come after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The Forerunner and Baptist always spoke out boldly against sin and injustice, and this brought him to the unwelcome attention of Herod, who had him imprisoned and later beheaded, as we know.

We, the faithful, believe that John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, thus serving as a bridge between the Old and the New Covenants that God has made with man. We also believe that, following his death, John descended into hell or hades and there once more preached that Jesus the Messiah was coming--so he was the Forerunner of Christ in death as he had been in life. According to our sacred tradition, John the Baptist also appears at the time of death to those who have not yet heard the Gospel and preaches Christ to them, giving them one last opportunity to be saved. Thus, St. John is also the patron saint of all converts. Furthermore, every Tuesday throughout the year is dedicated to his memory, with specific hymns sung in his honor during the liturgical services of each Tuesday.

In 1484 the right hand of the holy Forerunner—the very hand with which he had baptized the Savior and which had been stolen by the Muslims--was given away by the son of a sultan to the Catholic order of the Knights of Malta, trying to gain their good will in the ongoing struggles between Christendom and Islam. This holy relic had been in the possession of the Orthodox Church from the time of St. Luke, but had later been stolen by the Muslims, who also venerated St. John. The Baptist, you see, had also always been the patron of the Knights of Malta—from the time of their founding in the 11<sup>th</sup> century--, for which they are also sometimes called the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, so this was an inestimable gift. These Christian knights then transferred this sacred relic to the island of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea, which was their own kingdom, stronghold, and capitol, where it could be kept safely and venerated by these devout soldiers of Christ. Their cathedral on Malta is still today a simply magnificent gem of architecture and sacred art, most of which honors St. John. A portion of the right hand is also preserved and venerated on Mount Athos.

When, in the late 1790's, the Russian Tsar Paul I (who was martyred in 1802) became Grand Master of the Maltese Order, the right hand of the Baptist, part of the Life-Creating Cross and the ancient Philermos Icon of the Mother of God (from the island of Rhodes) were transferred from the island of Malta to Russia, to the church dedicated to the Icon of the Savior Not Made by Hands at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and a special service was composed for this Feast.

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Now, much of what I have just said here is known by historians and scholars of early Christianity. But in Holy Orthodoxy we seem to have a special and, frankly, unique place for the Forerunner and Baptist in our hearts as well as in our Faith. For us he has a remarkable and deep theological significance that goes beyond his merely having a particular “role to play” (if you will) in the early part of the Lord’s ministry.

Icons of St. John the Baptists clearly show this. They have logic of their own, and there is a wonderful, almost dreamlike-visionary quality to them. For instance, in some icons St. John is shown with wings. This type of icon is called the “Angel of the Desert”, because St. John grew up and lived his public life in the Judean wilderness. But even more important, the Scriptures themselves say of John: “Behold I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way, a voice crying in the wilderness.” (You see, in Greek, the word “messenger” is the same as “angel”—thus, the “winged John the Baptist”!)

In some other icons he is shown holding his own head on a platter, foretelling his beheading, and in others he is holding a chalice in which reposes the Divine Infant, the “Lamb of the world”—a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. Very often there is also a scroll which reads: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” For this reason we always call the consecrated bread of the Liturgy, “the Lamb”. Other times these icons have a scroll which says: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

There are also icons of John in which we see a tree, with an ax cutting into its trunk. This image comes from the Gospel of St. Luke, “And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.”

St. John is also shown in other types of icons, which there is not time to explain here, but all of them make it clear that he is quite separate from the rest of mankind; he is, in a mystical way, “above” all of humankind, and, in a strange way, even outside it. According to the sacred hymnography of the Church, after his martyrdom St. John dwells directly in the ranks of the angels of heaven and, say some commentators, this is still another reason why in some icons he is shown with wings. Therefore, all of the symbolic or allegorical elements in his various icons must be accepted as actually “real”, “true.”

Thus, the nature of St. John the Baptist cannot be completely understood by us in this age and in temporal time; it is only partly unveiled or revealed, because it’s impossible for us, with our fallen minds, to grasp what it would be to be a “humanized angel” or an “angelic man”.

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Thus, St. John was and is a bridge between two completely different worlds; these different worlds are somehow mystically combined in the Baptist, who surpassed all of the angelic hosts, but also all of humankind. This places him in an extremely close relationship to Christ our Lord and makes of him a great intercessor for us. The only one closer to the Lord is the Theotokos herself, she who is in and of herself, by virtue of having conceived and given birth to the God-Man, the actual boundary between this temporal world and eternity.

It is all quite wonderful, mysterious, and, frankly, unfathomable. But glory to our God who has revealed these mysteries to us, His simple children!

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