

Date: January 14, 2023

Subject: 31st Sunday After the Pentecost

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This Sunday's Gospel reading is the reading that is done yearly on every Sunday preceding the great holiday of the Theophany of Christ. Therefore, we have concluded our celebration of the Nativity and are preparing ourselves for the celebration of the Baptism of our Lord.

MARK 8: 1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God;

As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;

And preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.

I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.

Why did the Lord need to be born as a human being? Through a beautifully descriptive verse, St. Athanasius the Great gives us the answer. He tells us that God became a man in order to make men gods. This message was first given by Apostle Peter who explained it in the following way:

*Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these **ye might be partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*

But before Jesus himself came out to begin His mission to redeem and elevate man, He sent out to the world His "angel"—that is, messenger—whose job was to prepare mankind for the imminent appearance of the Savior. This was foretold by the Prophet Malachi:

Behold, I will send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.

Who was this "messenger" that the prophet was talking about? It was St. John the Baptist. He was *the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*. St. John did, indeed, come out of the wilderness. He had been living there since infancy, when his mother was able to miraculously save him from the murdering soldiers sent by King Herod to kill him, in case he was the new-born Savior.

A mountain opened up to save the mother and child from the hands of the killers. She, however, very soon died in the mountain cave, and the child was fed and raised by an angel. He remained in the wilderness, living the life of a most strict ascetic. *John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey*. When the right time arrived, God called him to begin his work.

The *way of the Lord* that St. John was teaching was the New Testament. The *path* that the people needed to *make straight* was the Old Testament. The Hebrews were repeatedly straying from it and needed to be corrected before the arrival of the Savior. St John's mission was to teach them how to accomplish this, which is why he began his work calling out to the people with one word: *repent*. After teaching them how to repent, he would then baptize them for *the remission of sins* through the *baptism of repentance*.

St. John was so successful, that *there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins*. They began to suspect that he was the expected Savior, which required him to explain their mistake: *There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit*.

How should we understand this distinction between the two baptisms? St. John's baptism was simply for repentance. Through the water, he washed them free from their sins. The Savior's baptism was and is performed through the grace of the Holy Spirit, which was missing from St. John's baptism. The grace of the Holy Spirit not only washes away sins, but also gives spiritual rebirth to enable a person to change his way of life and begin to live piously. Without receiving this kind of baptism, a person cannot be saved.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, both St. John and the Savior began their mission with this same word: *Repent!* And what we must understand and accept is that they were also directing this command to us, to everyone one of us. Although we have been reborn through Christ's baptism, we, nevertheless, continually stray from the *way of the Lord*. We sin all the time. We too need to *make straight* the path that we are walking on as we strive for our salvation. That is why the birth of the Savior is a monumentally important event. That is why Theophany is also such a significant holiday for us. We should not only celebrate it, but also be inspired by it to continually run to repentance.

On the day of Theophany, we will see the sinless Savior accepting St. John's baptism. He did this simply to teach us that without both baptism and repentance our eternity will be a very dark one. May His lesson be firmly grounded in our hearts and stiffen our resolve to avoid what distracts us from God's way, or to immediately run to Him when we do stray. The devil is a formidable and implacable enemy. He does continually succeed in distracting us. But with God in our hearts and our continual repentance, we can overcome him in the end.

With Much Love in God,
Archpriest Serge Kotar