

11/01/2021

Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, Homily at the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday after the Holy Theophany



Saint John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

New York, New York

January 10, 2021

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Our rejoicing in the Holy Epiphany of our Lord is not yet complete, and I am delighted to share the Sunday after Theophany with you at this beloved parish of Saint John the Baptist. We continue with our celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, and we honor the Forerunner and Prophet John, your Heavenly Patron.

We read in today's Gospel about the beginning of the Lord's preaching, whose hallmark was the same as His cousin John's:

Μετανοεῖτε! Ἦγγικε γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν!

“Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!”

But there was a moment, in between the Baptism of the Lord and the beginning of the preaching of Jesus – after John the Baptist was arrested – when both John and Jesus were both baptizing. In the Gospel of John, we read:

John’s disciples went to him and said, “Rabbi, the one who was with you on the other side of the Jordan...”

“To whom you bore witness...”

“Look! He is baptizing...”

“And everyone is going to Him!”

John replied to them, “No person can receive anything, unless heaven grants it. You are my witnesses; I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I am sent before him.’ The one with the bride is the bridegroom. The bridegroom’s friend, who stands by his side and listens to him, rejoices with special delight at the bridegroom’s voice. So this, my joy, is now complete. He must increase and I must decrease.”

My beloved brothers and sisters, here we behold the exceptional and faithful humility of your Patron Saint. John the Baptist understands that his Divine Cousin is attracting more disciples. He sees Jesus engaging in the same ministry of baptizing. And his closest followers express their concern, and even displeasure, that another would take up his ministry and succeed at it.

And this is the very moment that John bows beneath the spiritual authority of the One Who bowed under his hand to be baptized and fulfill all righteousness. Here, the Baptist bears witness to his role in divine Οἰκονομία, God’s plan for our Salvation.

He is not the Bridegroom, but his friend – his κουμπάρο, if you will.

He is not the Way, but the one who straightens the way, and makes the rough places smooth for us to come unto the Lord Jesus.

He is not the Light, but the lamp that was prepared for Christ, that we might be prepared to open our eyes to behold His glory, full of grace and truth.

Their relationship can almost be made analogous to a relay race, where one passes the baton to his teammate. It is a cooperative work, in the same way that the Apostle Paul says that one plants, another waters, and God gives the increase.

But the ultimate humility of the Baptist is voiced by himself:

Ἐκεῖνον δεῖ αὐξάνειν, ἐμὲ δὲ ἐλαττοῦσθαι.

He must increase, and I must decrease.

For this reason, the Church set the Feast of John's birth to be six months before the Feast of the Nativity, on June 24th. For we know that the Lord was conceived in the "sixth month" of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the mother of John Baptist. And this arrangement corresponds exactly to the words of the Baptist. He is born on the Summer Solstice, when the light begins to fade, and the Lord is born at the Winter Solstice, when the light begins to grow. The Lord increases, and John decreases.

What makes the spiritual aspect of all this difficult to comprehend is that in the Summer the days are longer, and in Winter the nights are longer. Even in the contemporaneous literature of the era, John the Baptist loomed a larger figure than our Lord Himself! But the Baptist was designed by the Divine Plan to fade, as our Lord came forward to work out our salvation, all the way to the Cross and death.

Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

Let us honor the Baptist this day and every day, as one who knew how to stand aside for the Lord of Glory, how to recognize his own role in the plan for salvation, and how to bring others to God.

This wonderful parish of Saint John is a true example of the humility of your Patron, and I commend all of you for your commitment to the mission of the Church and our Archdiocese.

May the Lord increase like the rising sun in all your hearts, through the intercessions of the Holy Prophet, Forerunner, and Baptist John. Amen.

goarch.org