

Today the grace of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove dwelt upon the waters. Today the Sun that never sets has dawned and the world is made radiant with the light of the Lord. Today the Moon with its radiant beams sheds light on the world. Today the stars formed of light make the inhabited world lovely with the brightness of their splendour. Today the clouds rain down from heaven the shower of justice for mankind. Today the Uncreated by his own will accepts the laying on of hands by his own creature. Today the Prophet and Forerunner draws near, but stands by with fear seeing God's condescension towards us. Today the streams of Jordan are changed into healing by the presence of the Lord. Today all creation is watered by mystical streams. Today the failings of mankind are being washed away by the waters of Jordan.

From the
Great Blessing of the Waters

Sunday 5 January 2014 is the Sunday before the Theophany of the Lord.

Matins Gospel: Luke 24:36-53

Epistle: 2 Timothy 4:5-8

Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

River Jordan was turned back by Elisseus' mantle once, when the fiery man of zeal Elias had been taken up; then were its waters divided hither and thither. The running streams became dry passage unto him, truly as a sign and type of Baptism, whereby we pass to the other side of the shifting stream of this fleeting life. Christ hath appeared in the Jordan River, to sanctify the waters.

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Readings and saints for this week:

Monday: Mark 1:9-11; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7; Matthew 3:13-17
Theophany of Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ

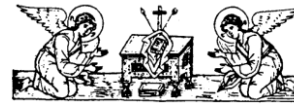
Tuesday: Acts of the Apostles 19:1-8; John 1:29-34
Synaxis of St John the Forerunner

Wednesday: Romans 6:3-11; John 3:22-33
St George the Chozebite; Abbess Dominica of Carthage

Thursday: 2 Timothy 2:1-10; Mark 1:9-15
Sts Polyuctos of Militane; Efstatios the Wonderworker; Peter of Sebaste

Friday: Ephesians 4:7-13; Luke 3:19-22
St Gregory of Nyssa; Dometian of Militene

Saturday: Hebrews 13:7-16; Matthew 4:1-11
Theodosius the Cenobiarch



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A Bulletin of Orthodox Christian Faith

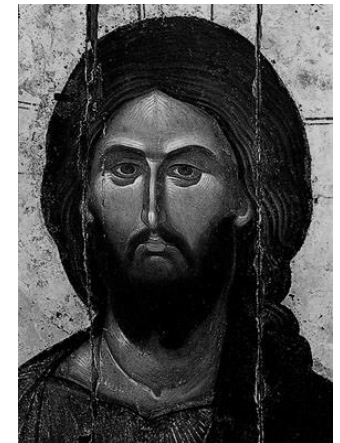
5 January 2014

A New Beginning

In today's Gospel, we hear the opening words of Saint Mark's Gospel. Unlike Saint Matthew and Saint Luke, Saint Mark does not begin with the accounts of Christ's birth, but rather starts in the desert, where Saint John the Baptist and Forerunner was calling people to repentance. Saint John clearly identified himself with the Old Testament prophets, who called on people to repent of their sins, turn around, and begin a new life, and the Church regards him as the greatest of the prophets. Indeed, he provides a crucial link between the Old Testament and the New.

The call to repentance lies at the heart of our Christian faith, yet its meaning can sometimes be difficult for us to grasp. Many people understand repentance as simply being miserable for one's sins – as if God would want us to be miserable! Others see it as making a huge effort to somehow win favour with God. While repentance certainly involves an element of sorrow for our sins, and while we do need to make an effort to change, the repentance of which the Gospel speaks is deeper than this. True repentance involves an encounter with God which turns our lives around and which is ultimately deeply joyful.

We are all different and so this encounter with God can take many forms, but Saint John was clear that repentance meant a turning to Jesus Christ, and he was preparing his disciples to recognise Christ when He appeared. We do not change our lives by telling ourselves how bad we are, or by trying to be better on our own steam. Rather, we begin to change by encountering the One "who is mightier than I," realising that we are loved by Him, learning to see ourselves as He sees us, and beginning to follow Him in our daily lives, nourished always by His Body which is the Church.



Abba Poeman said concerning Abba Pior that every day he made a new beginning.

From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers

The Icon of the Theophany of the Lord

In the icon of the Baptism of Christ, we see the Church's understanding of this great event, for an icon reflects the Church's faith and invites us to enter into that faith in a deeper way.

This icon reveals two fundamental mysteries. Firstly, there is the revelation of the Holy Trinity who reveals Himself on this day – through the voice of the Father and through the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ in the form of a dove. Secondly, there is the revelation of the mystery of baptism, through which we and all creation are purified and renewed.



We see these mysteries expressed in the icon. At the top, there is a segment of a circle which represents the heavens which had been closed by the sin of Adam, but which are now opened by Christ. This signifies the presence of God, and we see rays of light that shine upon the Saviour, together with the dove which represents the Holy Spirit who comes to rest on Him. For the Fathers of the Church, the dove is a reminder of the dove that had heralded the end of the flood. (Genesis 8:11-12)

Like the icon of the Nativity, the events of this icon are situated in the desert, representing the desert of our estrangement from God. And, just as His Nativity was situated in a cave, so too Christ is shown here in the river which forms a

cave around Him, pointing to the darkness of our world and to the tomb and the depths of hell into which He will descend in order to save us.

This watery tomb evokes the imagery of water found in the Old Testament. On the one hand, water is a symbol of chaos, death and destruction, as seen in the Flood. But this imagery is also used to express our longing for the Living Water which is our longing for Christ Himself. In the icon of the Baptism of Christ, we often see two small figures in the water. The one is a man who represents the Jordan River which the Prophet Elisha turned back with his mantle, prefiguring our own baptism. And the other is a woman who represents the sea and refers to that other prefiguration of Baptism, namely the crossing of the Red Sea.

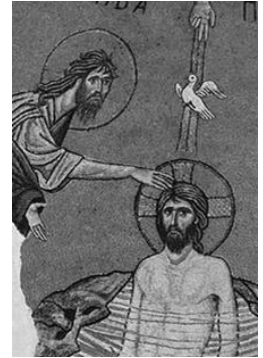
The icon shows Christ covered by the water, but He is shown as standing or walking in order to show that He is in control. He blesses the waters of the Jordan, sanctifying them by His immersion, and from then on the water becomes an image not of death, but of new life.

When the Lord descended today into the waters of the Jordan, He cried aloud to John: "Be not afraid to baptise me: for I am come to save Adam the first-formed man."

From the First hour of the Forefeast of the Theophany

The Baptism of the Lord

Tomorrow we celebrate the great feast of the Theophany of the Lord. This feast, when we commemorate Christ's baptism by Saint John the Baptist in the River Jordan, marks the public manifestation of Jesus Christ and the beginning of His ministry. In the Nativity, we celebrated the Incarnation of Christ and His coming among us. In this Theophany (sometimes also called His Epiphany), His true identity is revealed and His glory shines forth for all the world to see.



Saint John the Baptist was in the desert, preaching a baptism of repentance. We might wonder, as Saint John himself wondered, why the Sinless One would need to be baptised. Yet Jesus insisted that this was necessary and, in submitting to baptism, He revealed the very depths of His humility. Not only has He taken on our human flesh in the Incarnation, but in His baptism He identifies Himself with sinful humanity, entering into the depths of our brokenness, in order to take our sins upon Himself and to heal us.

However, in Christ's baptism we see not only His humility, but also His glory. His humility and His glory always go together, for the more He pours Himself out for us, the more His glory is revealed. No sooner has Jesus been baptised, than we are told that the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove, and that a voice from heaven declared: "This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on Him." This is the public manifestation of who Jesus Christ is, the shining forth of His glory for all the world to see. It is the revelation both of the waters that will cleanse us and of the Light that will

The Great Blessing of the Water

At Theophany we celebrate the rite of the Great Blessing of the Water, which often happens both inside and outside the Church. In this rite, holy water is blessed for our use, and the waters of our surrounding environment are also blessed. This Blessing begins with the chanting of special hymns and the incensing of the water, and concludes with Scripture readings, petitions and prayers.



The prayers and readings all seek to transmit the meaning of this great feast, showing how all creation has longed for the coming of Christ and now rejoices in His presence.

Through the Incarnation of Christ, the Son of God has taken on human flesh and He has now manifested Himself in the River Jordan. Through this, He has sanctified all of created reality – everything is now made holy in Him. Everything that has been corrupted and polluted by our human sinfulness is cleansed and purified by the gracious work of God. The corrupting power of Satan is conquered and all that seeks to poison God's good creation is destroyed as all things are once more made new in Him.