

## The Leave-taking of Theophany

*From the Wilderness, Prophets come...*

Today, is the *leave-taking* (ἀπόδοσις - apodosis) of the Theophany. In the present practice of the Byzantine Churches, the theme of certain feast days is continued for a varying period of time concluding with a leave-taking. This is similar to the western custom of having an eight-day period of celebration, an *octave*, following some major feasts.

The day following a significant feast is often dedicated to an individual of importance in the celebration of the previous day. Thus, on 26 March, the day after Annunciation, we remember the Archangel Gabriel. The day after Christmas, we honour the Virgin Mary as Theotokos. In the general Greek Byzantine calendar there are at least fifteen of these commemorations, called *synaxis* (Σύναξις). There are many more in local liturgical calendars. Last Sunday was not only the Sunday after Theophany (the previous day!) but as the day following the Feast, it was also the *synaxis* in honour of St John the Baptist. Now, as we take leave of the Theophany for another year, it is perhaps appropriate to consider the last prophet of the Old Covenant, and who was the God-appointed herald of the New.

Little, if anything is known of his life before he appeared on the banks of the River Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance. (Mk 1:4) He is mentioned a number of times in the four Gospels. Outside Christianity he is revered by Islam and Mandaeism. Christians see him prefigured in the prophetic ministry of Elijah, St Elias, (Kings 1&2), and foretold in the prophecy of Isaiah. (Book of Isaiah)

He was the son of the priest, Zacharias, and Elizabeth, who was a descendant of Aaron. (Lk 1:5) We sometimes forget that because of the hereditary nature of the Jewish priesthood, John was eligible for that office. His mother, Elizabeth, is traditionally believed to have been the daughter of Zoia, a sister of Anna, the grandmother of Jesus. Of Zacharias and Elizabeth, the Gospel of Luke says, "Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly." (Luke 1:6)

The Archangel Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation to our Lady, is also the one who appears to Zacharias in the Holy Place with news that, even in their old age, he and Elizabeth will be parents. I would urge you to read the annunciation to Zacharias in St Luke's Gospel. (1: 5-25) It is a masterly narration, and we can almost sense Gabriel becoming annoyed at Zacharias' scepticism! As well, read the account of the birth and naming of John. (Lk 1:57-79) Our scriptural encounter with the holy couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth, would be incomplete if we did not read of Mary's visit to the expectant Elizabeth, living in the hill country of Judea. (Luke 1:39-56)

In Luke 1:80, there is an obscure reference to the childhood of John - "and he was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel." Interpreters have spilled many litres of ink trying to explain this one comment.

Perhaps, as some have suggested, the young John was being cared for by a Jewish sectarian desert community; and, of course, the Qumran Essenes near the Dead Sea have been a frequently suggested possibility. Some have speculated that John was concealed in the wilderness because his father was the priest of whom Jesus spoke as being murdered between the temple and the altar. (Mt 23:35; Lk 11:5)

In some highly detailed narrative icons, Zacharias is shown dead in the Temple courtyard, whilst the young John flees into a mountainous cavern which miraculously closes behind him!

In most icons of the Baptism of Jesus, the only non-divine persons present are John, and the angels who wait to minister to our Lord as he leaves the waters. Whatever, anyone else saw at the River that day, of himself, John says, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with

water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’” (Jn 1:32-34)

It is in the presence of John that the Theophany is given, and to him is granted the privilege of recognising Jesus as the Messiah, “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29)

Whatever the details of John’s life, his message was clear to his contemporaries; so forthright that certain individuals plotted his death. While he gave good practical advice to people as diverse as soldiers and tax collectors (Lk 3: 11-14), his message was one intended for all people, *the call to repentance*.

It was a summons to radical repentance - *metanoia*, μετάνοια - a complete conversion or transformation of heart. The Greek word has the idea of what we would describe as a U-turn, a thorough change in direction. For his contemporaries, John the Baptizer, was rather like the signs we see at various freeway ramps, STOP, WRONG WAY. That is what he is saying to us today.

He was not a hot Calvinist – denouncing humankind as a mass of depravity irreversibly on the slippery slope to hellfire. In Luke, 3:11-14, he does not tell the tax collectors to quit their jobs, or the soldiers to leave the army, but he does counsel justice and that which is right; and, while he is strong in his language, “brood of vipers”, he preaches repentance not Judas-like despair. (Mt 27:5)

Each one of us is in constant need of *metanoia*. The baptism of John, like all the Jewish ritual immersions, was repeated as many times as was felt necessary. Our baptism, given by Jesus himself (Mt 28:19) is, as the Nicene Creed says, “one baptism for the remission of sins.”

However, as the need for repentance, confession and forgiveness, remains always with us, we have been given the opportunity to repent and re-form, as we journey through this life. As we draw near to the Great and Holy Lent, we are invited to take the opportunity to consider more closely the blessings that arise from the Sacrament of Confession as a type of “second baptism.”

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