

Sermon on the Baptism of Christ by St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople

(Edited by Fr. Nicklas Aiello)

We shall now say something about the present feast. Many celebrate the feastdays and know their designations, but the cause for which they were established they know not. Thus concerning this, that the present feast is called Theophany—everyone knows; but what this is—Theophany, and whether it be one thing or another, they know not. And this is shameful—every year to celebrate the feast day and not know its reason.

First of all therefore, it is necessary to say that there is not one Theophany, but two: the one actual, which already has occurred, and the second in future, both of which can be seen in the Epistle readings today of Paul to Titus: Of the first Theophany he says: “The grace of God hath revealed itself, having saved all mankind, decreeing, that we reject iniquity and worldly desires, and dwell in the present age in prudence and in righteousness and piety”—and about the future Theophany he says: “awaiting the blessed hope and glorious appearance of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ” (Tit 2:11-13). This Theophany is that which is spoken of in the OT prophecy of Joel: “the sun shall turn to darkness, and the moon to blood at first, then shall come the great and illuminating Day of the Lord” (Joel 2:31).

Why is not that day on which the Lord was born considered Theophany—but rather this day on which He was baptized? Because it was through His baptism that He sanctified (or cleansed) the nature of water. *Water was returned to its created purpose that [as with all of creation] was to be used by man in his relationship with God.* This is why we carry it home and keep it all year, because today, through the Church’s blessing this water, this water will be sanctified *that is, returned to its created purpose of being useful to us in our relationship with God.*

Why then is this day called Theophany? Because Christ made Himself known to all—not *just to the angels and a few people as when* He was born. Until this time He was not known to the people. Which is why John the Baptist told the people concerning the Christ: “Amidst you stands Him Whom you know not ” (Jn.1:26). In fact even the Baptist Himself did not know Him until that day? As he tells us in John 1: “And I knew Him not: but He that did send me to baptize told me: over Him that you shall see the Spirit descending and abiding upon, This is the One who will baptize in the Holy Spirit” (Jn. 1:33).

Now *it is essential to* understand the different baptisms. There was a Jewish baptism in the Law which cleansed from bodily impurities, but not to remove sins. Thus, whoever committed adultery, or decided on thievery, or who did some other kind of misdeed, it did not free him from guilt. But whoever touched the bones of the dead, whoever tasted food forbidden by the law, whoever approached from contamination, whoever consorted with lepers—that one washed, and until evening was impure, and then cleansed. (Lev 15:5, 22:4).

And there is this baptism of John which was far more sublime than the Jewish, but less so than ours: it was like a bridge between both baptisms, leading across itself from the first Jewish baptism of bodily purification to John’s baptism of repentance, to our baptism – the last baptism. Because the baptism of John did not impart the Holy Spirit and it did not grant forgiveness by grace: it gave the commandment to repent, but it was powerless to absolve sins. Therefore John said: “I baptize you with water...That One however will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Mt 3:11). Obviously, he did not baptize with the Spirit. We know this because when Paul “found certain disciples, and said to them: have you received ye the Holy Spirit since you have believed? They said to him: we don’t know about the Holy Spirit. He said to them: how were you baptized? They answered: into the baptism of John. And that’s when he said: John indeed baptized with the baptism of repentance but proclaimed to the people that they should

believe in the One coming after him, namely, Christ Jesus. Having heard this, they were baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus: and Paul laying his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them” (Acts 19:1-6).

Now it is necessary to ask, for whom was Christ baptized and by which baptism? It was neither the former – the Jewish, nor the last—ours. He needed no cleansing from sin because,—as He told us Himself “who of you convicts Me of Sin?” (Jn 8:46). *He had no sin and therefore needed no cleansing. And because the Divine nature dwelt within him - neither did He have need of repentance. Furthermore he had no need to receive the Spirit as we do because as God the Spirit is always in Him and with Him.* For whom then was He baptized, if this was done not for repentance, nor for the remission of sins, nor for receiving the gifts of the Spirit?

There are three reasons, two of which we’ve discussed: Him cleansing the nature of water, returning it to it’s created purpose of being used in our relationship with God. And, the purpose of it publically and with all the formality and reality of God the Father and the Holy Spirit being present in revealing Him as the Christ. What was known to just a few at his birth, that this is Immanuel, He who will save His people from their sins, is now literally proclaimed to the thousands who were within hearing distance by the voice of God Himself.

Truly, if John had gone to the home of each and, standing at the door, had spoken out for Christ and said: “He is the Son of God,” such a testimony would have been seen as suspicious *by the Jews*. But when all the people thronged out from all the cities to Jordan and remained on the banks of the river, and when He Himself came to be baptized and received the testimony of the Father by a voice from above and by the coming-upon of the Spirit in the form of a dove, then the testimony of John about Him was made beyond all questioning. Do you see, that the Holy Spirit did not descend as in a first time *at His nativity* when He came down upon Him, but in order to point *him* out—as though by a finger – *this is the one*. For this reason He came to baptism.

And the last reason he came to be baptized, we see with John asking Him when he approached Him to be baptized: “I have need to be baptized of Thee, and Thou art come to me for baptism?”—He answered: “Let it be for now, for thus it is necessary to fulfill every righteousness” (Mt 3:14-15). Do you see the meekness of the servant? Do you see the humility of the Master? What does He mean: “to fulfill every righteousness?” By righteousness is meant the fulfillment of all the commandments. Since fulfilling righteousness was necessary for all people—but none of them kept it or fulfilled it—Christ came then and fulfilled this righteousness.

And what righteousness is there, someone will say, in being baptized? Obedience for a prophet was righteous. As Christ was circumcised, offered sacrifice, kept the Sabbath and observed the Jewish feasts, so also He added this remaining thing, that He was obedient to *by being* baptized by a prophet. It was the will of God then, that all should be baptized—as John said: “He having sent me to baptize with water” (Jn 1:33); And Christ Himself said: “the publicans and the people do justify God, having been baptized with the baptism of John; the Pharisees and the lawyers reject the counsel of God concerning themselves, not having been baptized by him” (Lk 7:29-30). Thus, if obedience to God constitutes righteousness, and God sent John to baptize the nation, then Christ has also fulfilled this along with all the other commandments.

Consider, that the commandments *were like a debt*, which our race needed to pay; but we did not pay it, and we, falling under such an accusation, are embraced by death. Christ came, and finding us afflicted by it—He paid the debt, fulfilled *that which was necessary* and released those who were not able to pay. This is why *He does not answer John that: “it is necessary for us to do this or that,”* but rather “to fulfill every righteousness.” “It is for Me, being the Master,—says He,—proper to make payment for the needy.” Such was the reason for His baptism—*That the Jews would see that He had fulfilled the Law*

And finally let us briefly consider the Spirit descending on Him as a dove. *That as we see in the Scriptures* where there is reconciliation with God—there *often* also is the dove. *As* in the ark of Noah the dove brought the olive branch—a sign of God’s love of mankind and of the end of the flood. And now in the form of a dove, and not in a body—this particularly deserves to be noted—the Spirit descended *in the form of a dove*, announcing the universal mercy of God and showing with it, that the spiritual man needs to be gentle, simple and innocent, as Christ also says: “Unless you be converted and become as children, you shall not enter into the Heavenly Kingdom” (Mt 18:3). But that ark, after the end of the flood, remained upon the earth; this ark, after the end of wrath, is taken to heaven, and now this Immaculate and Imperishable Body is situated at the right hand of the Father.

We should therefore approach the Holy Sacrifice *of Christ’s body with us today* with great decorum, with proper piety, so as to merit us more of God’s benevolence, to cleanse our souls and to receive eternal blessings, of which may we all be worthy by the grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, power, and worship now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.