

HOMILY ON THE SUNDAY BEFORE EPIPHANY

FR. FILIP LOMMAERT

SUNDAY, JANUARY 2, 2021

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, amen.

Just over a week ago we celebrated the joyful event of the Nativity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Today we listened to the beginning of the Gospel reading of Saint Mark who talks about John the Baptist (Mark 1:1-8), and before that we listened to the reading from the Second Epistle to Timothy. This Epistle was written by Saint Paul a short while before he died a martyr's death in Rome (2 Timothy 4:1-8).

What is the relationship between these two readings, I hear you say? I think it is that both speak to us about faith in God as a path. Faith is a path by which we approach God, and a path by which the Lord approaches us.

The preaching of the Gospel began with these words addressed by John the Baptist to the people: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". In the Epistle reading the Apostle Paul says: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:6-7)". "My course" here has the meaning of a race: Saint Paul used the image of a long-distance runner attaining his goal and winning the competition.

Today we listened to both the beginning and the end of the path, and we heard about the crown that is prepared for everyone who has not stumbled or fallen, and who has not given up in trying to reach this goal. And this goal is the Lord Himself.

John the Baptist is also called the forerunner from the Greek "ο πρόδρομος", which means "scout," "guide," a "pathfinder" or "one sent before a king to prepare the way." In Greek the word also means "first fruits." In ancient times, kings, and rulers, whenever they wanted to undertake a journey or expedition, especially through unknown or inhospitable lands, would send forerunners or heralds before them to prepare the way.

To do this, it was necessary for them to provide supplies, and make bridges, or find fording places over the streams; to level hills, fill up valleys; and to construct path. John the Baptist, although not preparing the way for a king or ruler, was such a man. The main difference being that he prepared the way for the Son of God.

John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of Christ, who called His disciples—us!

We all have opportunities to take steps that will affect our lives, hopefully in a positive way. In this way, each of us is a forerunner, marking and improving the trail through the conduct of our lives.

The first step, and the beginning of the Christian life, something we should remind ourselves of every day, is repentance. The words of John the Baptist: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2); are addressed to each one of us. These words should not be understood in the sense that the Kingdom of God is approaching chronologically, at a certain time. No, the Kingdom of God is always with us, and it is always ready to come and enter us.

The only question we must ask ourselves is whether we are ready to enter the Kingdom of God and whether we are ready to accept it within ourselves. Those who will remain outside the Kingdom of God will not be those that the Lord has condemned for their mistakes, but rather those who did not desire or did not find the strength to follow this path to the end, the gates of the Kingdom of God. It will be those people who did not persevere, who gave up at the halfway mark. We should remember that, although we are on this path, there is always the danger that we will not reach the end, that we will stumble, or give up.

The Apostle Paul says: “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5).

Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk had the following to say about this: “The “work of an evangelist” is the work of spreading the good news. Each of us must be a preacher, carrying Christ’s Gospel into the world – not only in words, but above all by our whole way of life and with the goal and aspiration of going out to meet God and of seeking the Kingdom of God. We should thereby become an example to others, and this is the service of which the Apostle Paul speaks in the Second Epistle to Timothy.

We are at the beginning of that path, that journey, which is leading us from the Nativity to Pascha. The Church reminds us of that beginning where we must remind ourselves every day to show repentance and to show a dogged determination in our search for the Kingdom of God. The Church also reminds us that Christ is always with us, that the Kingdom of God is always near us. The Church also reminds us that it depends only upon us whether we shall attain our goal and whether we will follow this path to its end and receive the crown that the Lord Jesus Christ has prepared for each one of us.

Today we are also looking forward toward the Feast of Theophany when we will celebrate Christ’s baptism in the river Jordan and the revelation that He is truly the Son of God. His divinity is manifest, is shown openly, when, at His baptism, the voice of the Father declares “You are my beloved Son” and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove.

Theophany shows us that Jesus Christ is not merely a great religious teacher or moral example. Jesus Christ is both divine and human, both fully God and fully man. He is the second Person of the Holy Trinity, which consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is human in every way yet without sin. He is one divine Person in two natures—divine and human. With the Incarnation, which means “taking on flesh,” indicating that God has now truly become man, humanity is now joined to God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the living Word, the true God, eternal wisdom, life, sanctification, power, and the true light. Through Him the Holy Spirit was manifested, the spirit of truth, the gift of Sonship, the pledge of our future inheritance, the first fruits of eternal blessings, the life-giving power, the source of sanctification through whom every rational and spiritual creature is made capable of worshipping Him and giving Him eternal glorification, for all things are subject to Him.

At the age of thirty, Jesus approached John the Baptist at the Jordan River and was baptized there by him. He was immersed in the water and came out again. At this event, St. John said of Him, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Jesus' baptism began His mission of sanctifying all creation, driving out the demons, and re-establishing the rule of God. Through His and our baptism, we become participants in the holy mystery of salvation.

The life-giving power of the Holy Spirit was given to us on the day of our Baptism and Chrismation. That is why Baptism and Chrismation are not separated in the Orthodox Church, because they are both baptisms. One is with water for cleansing of sins and the other is baptism with the Spirit for power. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). Every Divine Liturgy is a fresh, new Pentecost in which Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. When we kneel, the priest prays, "Send down Your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these holy gifts." That is why this moment of the liturgy is so sacred.

At the start of this new year, may God help us to increase in faith and piety. Let us continue to come to church with reverence, let us fulfil the customs and rules of the church knowing that it is useful for our soul. Let us constantly think about our faith, read the Word of God, edify ourselves by it and live our lives guided by our faith, prayer and good deeds attracting God's grace.

Amen.