

3rd May 2026 Fourth of Pascha The Paralytic Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

1] Saint John the apostle is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on 8th May: that falls this coming Friday. We read his gospel, particularly during these days of Pascha. For us, he is the first among true theologians: those who handle and can speak on the divine mystery; going beyond the great patriarch Abraham, the friend of God; superseding even Moses the God-seer, who perceived the Existing One in the Burning Bush on Sinai. for St John knew God, revealed in our flesh.

2] What, then, was John's divine knowledge; what theophany did he experience; what made him a theologian? He explains in his first epistle: '*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.*' [1Jn 1:1] Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was the direct source of the apostle's theology.

3] Few have that title, *Theologian* in the communion of Orthodox churches: among the Fathers we have St Gregory the Theologian; later, St Simeon the *New Theologian*: that is, Simeon as the 'new St John,' for, like the apostle, the true theologian is one who is illumined in the grace of Christ.

4] I have the greatest respect for the scholar, the academic, but the intellectual mind that researches and teaches academic courses remains in the realm of study, valuable though that be. True Theology is the spiritual fruit of prayer, the freedom of an ascetic life, and the revealing of the love of God from within: it is revealed in the way of the cross.

5] St John was the brother of the apostle James and, probably, very young at the time and seems to have lived on earth long after the other apostles. At the Mystical Supper, in that ancient style of dining, he reclined close to Christ, consuming, as it were, from the very source, the mystical theology which is ours in the Holy Tradition of Orthodoxy. Where once, the incarnate Christ was the source of illumination for His Apostles, now, it is through God the Holy Spirit that the heavenly treasure, that pearl of great price, is available to all who are the baptised and anointed; who seek the kingdom by prayer, fasting and charity.

6] St John's gospel is given to us in the canon of the holy scriptures as a testimony of matters he himself had witnessed and, in which, he had been caught up. Like many ancient writers, he does not refer to himself by name: he is not even named at all in the gospel, as he is in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Instead, in his humility, he cloaks himself under a title, *the beloved disciple*.

7] The gospel of John is the fruit of much meditation and reflection upon the life of Christ. It appears to have

been written by an amanuensis, a scribe, who takes down gathered memories from the apostle. As the one doing the writing adds as a footnote concerning the author: '*This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true.*' [Jn 21:24]

8] In his gospel, the apostle has a very clear purpose in mind ~ '*That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*' [Jn 20:31] And to do this he presents the reader with a series of seven signs, such as the first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana; a beginning of signs, manifesting His glory. (cf Jn 2:11) And, of course, finally, the greatest and most important beyond them all, the eighth sign: Christ's own resurrection from the dead, trampling down death itself.

9] It is no wonder, therefore, that in these days of Paschal joy, the Church reads St John, confirming the ground of our faith, as Our Lord says Himself, '*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*' [Jn 20:29] It is fitting also that we have the continuous reading of the Acts of the Apostles at this season, rehearsing the preaching of those who knew the risen Christ and bore fearless witness to Him in that ancient world.

10] Today, among the signs, we read of the paralytic who lay helpless at the pool by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem called, Bethesda. It was the pool where

sheep were washed before being offered in the temple sacrifices. We can delve, here, into John's own mind: how those five porticoes around the pool suggested to him the five books of Moses, the Old Testament law; and how that multitude of washed up, wrecked and powerless cases, those pitiable invalids, blind, lame and paralysed people lay, longing and waiting for a miracle, represented crippled humanity itself ~ to this day, no different, in essence, from us in our own mortality.

11] But that Old Law could only take its followers so far: a certain kind of redemption; a certain righteousness; a certain holiness, but not eternal salvation, not everlasting Life. We hear the frustration in the paralysed man's voice: *'Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before me.'*

12] But here, in this sign that St John puts before us, yes, there is a miracle of physical healing, good for this life on earth. But there is something within and beyond all that, for this story prefigures our baptism into Christ. *'Rise, take up your pallet, and walk,'* he is told by Christ. He has no need to go into the sheep pool, now; all that has been surpassed. From now on, John is teaching us, it is Christ who give life in all its fulness, even unto the ages.

13] Like Christ, the apostle themselves, illumined by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, continued to do great

signs. Peter, we are told today, came down to the saints who dwelt at Lydda. Here, he restores Aeneas to health and, curiously, we read, that people turned *back* to the Lord. Had they been followers of the Way of Christ and had yet, so early, fallen away? Perhaps so! But it is Peter now, the apostle, who brings back the lost sheep. He even raises the dead ~ Tabitha at Joppa, and there gained converts to Christ by that sign. After all, this is what Our Lord promised at the Mystical Supper: *'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.'* [Jn 14:12]

14] So what are we to draw from this today; we, who not only lie close to Christ, like John at the Supper, but who even feed spiritually upon His very Body and Blood, what are we instructed to do?

15] In the Orthodox Church throughout the known world, there are those who, to this day, illumined in Christ, have wrought miracles of healing by prayer and fasting. And if most of us, the great company of Orthodox believers, baptised, redeemed, still seeking to increase our faith, still striving to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, if we lack such spiritual gifts of healing, in no way are we absolved from being *a sign* in the world. *'Sir,'* said the paralytic. *I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled.'* Well, he has now! Even if we lack the the power of miraculous signs, let's recall the words of Blessed Paul:

Though I have the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries, all knowledge, have faith to remove mountains, give all my goods to feed the poor, and give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (cf 1 Cor 13:2-3)

16] We can, at least, strive to love; to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to love those who do not yet know Christ and, of course, the multitudes of washed up, wrecked and crippled humanity. For all those whom we encounter, who have no one to help them into the waters of baptism, we must be the sign in the way that we love and pray and fast, and reveal to them that love of God in Christ who, being risen from the dead, and on those in the tomb bestows Life!