

SERMON - Sunday Before Theophany - January 5, 2020 - Mark 1:1-8

Adapted from “Что нужно знать о Таинстве Крещения”, Воздвижение, 2015

Baptism is the Holy Mystery (Sacrament) by which one who has faith and believes in God, through triple immersion in water, invoking God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, dies to the life of the flesh and sin and is born again into a life that is spiritual and holy. In the Gospel the original Greek word for this re-birth is “ανωθεν,” which literally means that we are born “from above.” In the Old Testament times there was a practice, called in Hebrew a “mikvah, מקווה” where one washed with water as a sign of moral cleansing and ritual purification. Our Savior, having been baptized by St. John the Forerunner, sanctified this baptism. In other words, it was not the water of the Jordan river that sanctified our Savior, but the opposite, our Savior’s descent into the Jordan sanctified the water of this river and all the waters of the earth. Before our Lord’s ascension into Heaven he commanded the apostles: “Go, and teach all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

Baptism is a sacred mystery through which the baptized person receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through Holy Baptism we become members of the Holy Church and begin a new life as Christians. The Lord Himself said, “Whoever is not born according to water and the Spirit, cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5), that is to say, cannot become a member of the Church and cannot take part in the other Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church. Repentance and faith are absolute requirements in order to receive the Holy Mystery of Baptism. The penitent acknowledges his or her sins, and understands what a great mercy God bestows in this Mystery, forgiving all sins and trespasses. For every Christian Christ must be the foundation of everything, and following Christ—the main purpose and aim of one’s earthly life. Baptism not only forgives all of our past sins, but gives us the power to struggle with all sins and temptations in the future, which is the lifelong struggle towards spiritual perfection. After baptism, having been freed from ancestral sin and liberated from from the power of Satan, the ability and demands of us to struggle against sin and temptation as well as to do good become stricter. Adults must prepare themselves for baptism through prayer, fasting, regular attendance in church, and instruction by the parish priest in the Orthodox faith. The parents and Godparents of children who are going to be baptized are required to learn about the Orthodox faith as well, pray and have a firm resolve to teach and raise the Christian child in evangelical piety. The parents and Godparents have a great responsibility before God to be good examples to the child of how a Christian should live. The infant cannot answer for his or herself at Baptism. The Godparents, therefore, must answer on behalf of the child, and not in a hypocritical, careless or only ritualistic way, but in a firm and decisive way from the heart, with a sincere faith as demonstrated by the life that the Godparents lead. It is senseless and very wrong for someone to be a Godparent who rarely goes to church and rarely or never goes to Confession or Holy Communion. The Godparents, as well as the parents, will have to give an accounting for the child who is baptized and will have to answer to the Lord on the day of the Last Judgement about how well or how poorly they raised the child as an Orthodox Christian by example and teaching. Therefore, the responsibility of being a parent or Godparent of a child who is brought to the church for baptism is very, very huge. It is a formal requirement in the Russian Orthodox Church that Godparents should fast, go to Confession and receive Holy Communion before the baptism.

Dear Christians, through Holy Baptism, we and our children and our Godchildren were given a pure, clean garment as white as snow. It is our responsibility to keep this garment pure and undefiled by living the Christian life and daily repenting for our sins and errors. May our Lord inspire us to zealously, with courage, love, humility and faith to always, until the end of our lives, to follow this narrow path to Heaven, so that in the end our Lord will say to us, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of thy Lord” (Matthew 25:23). Amen!