

**The 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Great Fast Nicodemus proceeds on his way**

Romans 7 : 1 – 19; 1John 4 : 18 – f; Acts 5 : 34 – f;

Psalm 16 (17) : 3, 4

Thou has proved and visited my heart in the night,  
Thou has tried me by fire,  
Lest unrighteousness be found in me

John 3 : 1 – 12

**BAPTISM INTO THE SPIRIT AND THE TRUTH**

Note the reading appointed for the first Sunday [day before this fast began] was (John 3 : 10 – 25). That reading started where this one ends. This is a traditional way to demonstrate the interrelations of the readings selected by our Orthodox Fathers for the Sundays of the Great Fast. Each part of the series was a setting for a lesson planned to explain Christian Baptism, to people, of the age of reason, who had not yet been baptized. The lesson for the 4<sup>th</sup> Week offers more details on this topic, under the heading **“SUNDAY BIBLE READINGS AS A BASIC COURSE IN CHRISTIANITY.”**

Today, few of us know any adults contemplating baptism into our church, yet, this plan is still relevant for us, because most of us were baptized before we knew what was happening in our lives, and naturally, now, ask, “Why?” Further, we know what a hot topic infant baptism can be with those who interpret the Gospels differently, than we Orthodox Tewahedo Christians do.

Although there are several different lessons worthy of study in the readings for the Seventh Sunday of the Great Fast, this year, we selected the topic of “infant baptism.” We focus on that issue, because, now that we are aware of the need for responsible use of talents (6<sup>th</sup> week): by considering such things, we may learn for our own benefit, as well as preparing to answer other people’s questions, as they mature to the point of asking. At the center of the debate about infant baptism are three basic questions. The first question: What essentially does Baptism do for one who receives it? The second question is: which comes first, in a proper relationship with God? Is it knowledge or is it grace? The third question is too often overlooked: What is the appropriate response, once one knows what baptism means?

We will not dwell on the fact that Jesus Christ Himself has been quoted, stating that Baptism is essential. Even though our faith interprets such quotes like John 3:5\_ paralleled by Mk. 10:14,15\_ as indicating that baptism is the only way to start becoming by grace what Jesus Christ was born to make possible, we know that others have repeatedly taken these figuratively. God could have saved us any way He wished, but out

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of His love He chose to touch us where we live. He became one of us, as an infant, to show us how we ought to grow up to become one with Him. The God-man was born as an infant, growing into the job that He had come to do.

But, who is Jesus of Nazareth, anyway? The answer to the question of, “Who is Jesus Christ?” is one of the basic learning objectives of this series. If one has not grown into knowing Him personally from infancy, one must find out who He really is. In today’s reading, St. John giving his witness about Jesus, has set before us an example of a mature man, whom most people, there, and then, would have assumed, already had all the answers. He was a Pharisee, whose bread and butter was the Law (Rm. 7:1-9), coming by the cover of night, calling Jesus “Rabbi,” and asking Him, what he must do, to be saved.

Yet, most people, when they hear or read the Gospel passage assigned for this 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Great Fast, whether they have already been baptized, or not\_ like this old man\_ fail to fully understand Jesus’ responses. Like Nicodemus, they miss one of the critical points that Jesus was trying to make. Nicodemus showed that he at least had an advantage over most of his contemporaries. He perceived that the miracles which Jesus did indicated that He acted with divine power. But even as he spoke to Him, face to face, he did not realize he was talking to God.

Through the centuries, many Bible students have noticed that three of the four written Gospel versions recognized as Apostolic in inspiration, agree in many respects, but the fourth one, the one that we are looking at today: according to St. John, is quite different in various details, from the other three. For an instance, St. John’s telling often seems to disregard the sequence of events on which the other three agree. If Mathew, Mark, Luke or John had written about Nicodemus, this story would probably be in chapter ten of this version, rather than here, where they would have recounted Jesus, Himself, being baptized. John’s Gospel is necessarily different. It, typically, avoids a time line, showing, instead, approaches which are more durable than time.

John the Evangelist does the good news very differently. In situations where Jesus had concluded important lessons, the others, like Matthew 7:28, 29, reports “when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: 29 For he taught them as one having authority . . .” Mark 1:22 phrases it “And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority. . .” and Luke records “And they were all amazed, and spoke among themselves, saying, What a word is this! for with authority and power he commands . . .” John has a similar phrase in Chapter 5, verses 26 and 27: “For as the Father has life in Himself; so has He given to the Son to have life in Himself; 27 And has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of man.”

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What is unique in John's Gospel is that he quotes Jesus, opening twenty-five important pronouncements\_ as He did three in this lesson to Nicodemus\_ with what has variously been rendered in English translations as "Verily, verily. . .," "Truly, truly . . .," ". . . most solemnly" In Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Ge'ez, and other than "Bible Society versions", all 25 of these phrases open with what should be transliterated into Amharic, English, or whatever as, "Amen. Amen." We are all familiar with "Amen.", but we are used to using it as a closure of important sayings. To appreciate the significance of starting with a double "Amen," we ought to know that Jesus' contemporaries, including Nicodemus, should have recognized that opening line as a proclamation of one speaking with divine authority. To close with "Amen." is to witness to the truth of what has been said. Since we believe that there is an absolute Truth, and that it is God's domain\_ that He shares it with us as He wills, to end with "Amen." is to say, "This is godly." To open with a double "Amen." is to say I speak for God. The double "Amen" openers are just some of the many ways in which St. John reinforces the central theme of his poetic first chapter proclaiming the Son of man to be God incarnate. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:1, 12, 13)

To be baptized into the divinity of Christ, we are entering a covenant, which "fulfills all righteousness." It is beyond our capability to understand this great mystery of God's condescending love to save us\_ even if we live to be as old as Nicodemus and earn Ph.D.'s in Theology. Yet, we can know from what He has revealed, that this opening of the font of grace is vital to our eternal life. It is an initiation, like circumcision was in the covenant which God made with Abraham, telling him that he, all of his household, and all of his children must be initiated. From Apostolic times whole households were, also, baptized into Christ. The notion of withholding this rite until a child reached the age of reason was a Western European innovation, as an attempt to fix Western European errors in sacramental theology.

Now, that we have a better appreciation for who said what in the Gospel lesson, we ought to reconsider Nicodemus' response when Christ said, "Amen. Amen. I say unto you, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" We know that it is not possible, nor necessary, for one to enter again into one's mother's womb, because Christ was talking about a spiritual reality. Rather than pursuing that, we should ask ourselves, whether it is easier for a child to be raised as a first class member of a covenant, gradually enlightened in every aspect of one's being (physical, mental, and spiritual); or as an adult outsider, discovering that covenant, to become again as the little child, which he or she might only imagine having been, in order to relearn to live life in Christ Jesus?

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Now, let us consider our initial three questions: What essentially does Baptism do for one who receives it? The second question is: which comes first, in a proper relationship with God? Is it knowledge or is it grace? The third question is: What is the appropriate response, once one knows what baptism means?

1. What essentially does Baptism do for one who receives it? Baptism is rebirth unto eternal life: not according to such temporary things as “of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” It is the cleansing of all sin, and all of the effects of sin, both inherited from our origin, and personal (for those who have reached the age of reason). It is an initiation into the New and Everlasting Covenant of Christ’s body which is immortal and not bound by the letter of written laws which had guided those who accepted it toward this fulfillment of all righteousness. The New Covenant is a covenant of love which the Holy Spirit confirms in the following sacrament (mystery) of Chrismation. It is so superior to that tentative verbal law which ruled by fear, that it seems to blow it away. By living and growing in this covenant, we learn\_ not just to think in terms of truth, but\_ to act in truth. As we learn to live according to the love which the Holy Spirit instills, we are enabled to exceed all objectives of the Law. Just as natural parents want their babies to be born into a citizenship of maximum benefits, so Christ as the Father of the age to come, wants us to be born into citizenship of His heavenly kingdom.

2. Which comes first, in a proper relationship with God? Is it knowledge or is it grace? This is, actually, a contrived, synthetic, man-made self-justifying dichotomy. Just because it has been in vogue for hundreds of years, does not make it a valid question. For, as our Lord told Nicodemus, “Amen, Amen, I say unto you, ‘Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto you, You must be born again. The wind blows where it lists, and you hear the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it comes, and whither it goes: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.’” Whether one is first inspired by God to seek Him, or for the wrong reasons accepts what God offers, or a parent is inspired to bring their child who does not know the difference to live in God’s house with full privileges; none of these, in the least, challenges God’s grace. From our perspective, what really matters is what we do with what God has given us. That is why the lesson of the talents had to be included in this course of instructions, before Christ was shown sending Nicodemus on his way.

3. What is the appropriate response, once one knows what baptism means? Whether Jesus baptized Nicodemus that very night, he required more instruction before he could find the courage to receive it in the day light, or if it was done after Christ’s resurrection from the dead, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, we know not. But according to Orthodox tradition, we do believe that from that time, Nicodemus began doing the walk to follow Christ, because he was there at the cross to assist Joseph of Arimathaea take

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down Christ's body from the cross, prepare it, and bury it. We commemorate them both in every qidase.

Therefore, just as it was with Christ's parable of the talents, which we covered last week, even if one's beginning in grace seems somehow flawed, according to human criteria, the critical question, is how we use what we have received. Perhaps, one might wish that he or she had been asked whether of not to be baptized. Perhaps, one might wish that he or she had been personally present with Nicodemus to hear Christ's teaching on this subject. One might wish that he or she still had at least the mementos, like a baptismal robe or candle as an inspirational token of the event. Another\_ with more compelling evidence of personal weaknesses, might just as well think that he or she would have found it easier to do what needs doing, if baptized as an infant. All of these are diabolical plots to lull one off into fruitless "wishful thinking." Entertaining these thoughts is the opposite of the habits of prayer and fasting that we should be working on at in this season. Unchecked those stray thoughts produce spiritual disease which causes one to ignore God's mercy. Such is not one of the fruits of the Spirit. From this moment let us use whatever God has given us to respond by preparing to celebrate His Resurrection, using every precious moment to do His "will, on earth, as it is in heaven."

Abba Thomas  
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