

A SERMON
on
THE BEHEADING OF SAINT JOHN THE
FORERUNNER AND BAPTIST OF THE LORD*

By Saint John Maximovich of San Francisco

Wherefore, having contested for the truth, thou
didst rejoice to announce the good tidings even
to those in Hades: that God hath appeared in the
flesh taking away the sin of the world and
granting us great mercy.

*Dismissal Hymn of the Feast. August 29***

The whole life of Saint John the Forerunner from its first days was entirely dedicated to the One Who came after him. In the days when the infants were massacred in Bethlehem he was also sought by Herod, and his mother Elizabeth fled with him into the desert, where on the fortieth day she died. His father Zacharias was killed at the same time by the servants of Herod in the Temple. The desert raised up John, and he remained in it in silence for thirty years, when *the word of God came unto him*, commanding him to preach repentance and call on men to prepare the way of the Lord (Luke 3:2).

Having prepared the minds of the Jews to expect the speedy coming of the Messiah, and having gathered around himself disciples, of whom many later became the first disciples of Christ, John the Baptist, half a year after the beginning of his ministry, baptized Christ and was a witness of the mystery of the Holy Trinity which was then revealed. Having indicated to those who were with him the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, John began to depart into the shadows, and everyone began to go to the new Teacher.

But John, far from grieving over this, rejoiced. When his especially devoted disciples spoke to him of this, grieving over the decreasing fame of their teacher, he replied with words that clearly expressed his personality. *I am not the Christ, but I am sent before Him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:28-30).

Soon after this there thundered forth his word accusing Herod, for which he was cast into prison, where he ended his earthly life, being beheaded during Herod's banquet.

The beheading of Saint John the Baptist, which cut off his earthly life, at the same time placed a beginning to his new and glorious ministry as Forerunner.

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The soul of Saint John the Baptist, departing his ascetic body, went to the place where the souls of all those who died before the Saviour's death on the Cross went to Hades, in which were the souls of everyone, beginning from Adam.

However, the holy and righteous soul of Saint John the Baptist did not go there in order to experience a dark condition of alienation and distance from God. The "friend of the Bridegroom," who had baptized Him and suffered for righteousness, bore in himself the hope of the coming Kingdom of God which he had preached to all, preparing the way of Him Who cometh, and was inseparably bound to Him in his devotion, testifying everywhere of Christ as His messenger, sent before His face.

Having descended to Hades, John continued the ministry which he had performed on earth — the preaching of the drawing near of the Kingdom of God. The souls of the Old Testament righteous ones were languishing in Hades, awaiting the fulfillment of what had been said by God to Adam about the coming of the One Who would conquer the serpent. The prophets who had seen beforehand in spirit the coming of the Messiah awaited the fulfillment of the revelations which had been made to them. To them, deprived of the light of God's glory, tormented with waiting for the fulfillment of their hope, came John, having descended to Hades, bringing the joyful tidings that soon the kingdom of Hades would be destroyed, and those who awaited the Redeemer would soon behold Him and be liberated by Him. He testified that the Son of God had already come to earth and that he himself, baptizing Him, had seen the Holy Spirit descending and remaining on Him (John 1:33-34).

The preaching of John concerning the coming of the Messiah was addressed not only to the souls of the righteous, but to all who were in Hades: He appeared in Hades to prepare the way of the Lord, just as he had prepared it on earth. The descent to Hades of John the Baptist was the proclamation of joy to those who were languishing there, by the preaching of the Gospel in Hades.

The souls of all the dead, save for the most inveterate sinners, heeded the preaching of the Baptist. Therefore, when Christ descended to Hades after His death on the Cross, He was greeted not only by the Old Testament righteous ones, but also by the souls of those who once were disobedient and opposed the long suffering of God in the days of Noah and during the rest of the time that sin reigned among men (I Peter 3:20).

Hades was destroyed by the descent into it of the soul of Christ; the dark confinement shone with light; the souls of the reposed were led into the Kingdom of Heaven. The entry-way to this ruin of Hades was the descent into it of the Baptist. Having fulfilled his ministry as Forerunner on earth, he appeared as the Forerunner of Christ in Hades. His beheading is not only the culmination of his earthly exploit, but also the beginning of a new and glorious ministry.

Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11; Luke 7:28), Christ said of him. *This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee* (Luke 7:27).

These words of the Lord Himself testify of the spiritual greatness of John and his high purpose in the work of the salvation of the human race. He appeared as

the servant and preacher of God as no other single man in the world, having begun to preach and praise Christ before his birth, and finishing it even after his death, ascending with Christ into the Kingdom of Heaven after the destruction of Hades. As the greatest of the righteous, a worthy place was prepared for him in the Kingdom of his Friend, where he remains now, awaiting its revelation in all glory and the triumphant feast of the Lamb of God in the Second Coming, when He will *gather His wheat into the garner, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire* (Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17).

His beheading was his final exploit on earth, and the last step for the receiving of the greatest reward in the Kingdom of Heaven; while for all those in Hades it was the rising of the morning star before the appearance of the Sun of Righteousness.

Just as the nativity of Saint John the Forerunner and Baptist is the beginning of the Gospel for the living, so is his beheading the beginning of the Gospel for the dead. "The glorious beheading of the Forerunner was a certain Divine dispensation, that the coming of the Saviour might also be preached to those in Hades (Kontakion of the Feast).^{*} "Be glad, O Baptist, and let thy spirit dance: for thou dost accuse the godless Herod, and dost preach to those in Hades saying: Our Salvation hath drawn near" (Ode 4 of the Canon in the Slavonic Menaion).

He that went before Thy birth and divine Passion, is gone by the sword into the nethermost depths as the Prophet and messenger also of Thy going down thither; for he, John, is the Voice of the Word, and he shouteth: O ye dead, supremely exalt the Giver of Life; ye blind, the Giver of Light; ye captives, the Deliverer, even Christ (Ode 8 of the Canon).^{*}

More Hymns from the Feast of the Beheading of the Forerunner (August 29)*

Thou foreshonest as the lamp, thou wast sent before as the messenger, as the Prophet thou preachest the Lamb of God which hath appeared, namely Christ; and as a Martyr, thou hast had thy head cut off, that thou mightiest proclaim Him even to the dead in Hades.

(Ode 7 of the Canon)

He that came from barrenness as the forerunner to the Virgin birth, now, through the cutting off of his head, is become the pathfinder for the voluntary Crucifixion of Him that created all things; and unto those in Hades he crieth out: O ye dead, supremely exalt the Giver

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of Life; ye blind, the Giver of Light; ye captives, the Deliverer, even Christ.

(Ode 8 of the Canon)

The voice of one crying was thou, O Baptist; for having shone as a Prophet from a Prophet, in the wilderness thou didst cry unto all: Repent ye; and thou didst rebuke Herod, when he ignobly wrought lascivious deeds; and thou wentest on before, preaching the Kingdom of God even unto those in Hades.

(Ode 9 of the Canon)

It was a lawless birthday and a most shameless banquet that Herod kept; for being bewitched by female wantonness and stung with ungodly lust for women, he cut off the Forerunner's head, but did not cut out the Prophet's tongue, which convicted his madness. He shed innocent blood, wishing to cover his abominable sin; but he could not cover therewith the voice of one crying unto all men to repent. Herod rejoiced in killing, but let us celebrate with longing the blessed slaughter of the Baptist John. For in Hades, unto them that sat in darkness and the shadow of death, he was the first to preach the Life, the Dayspring from on high, Christ our God, Who alone is plenteous in mercy.

Come, O ye people, let us acclaim the Prophet and Martyr and Baptist of the Saviour. For this man, being an angel in the flesh, rebuked Herod, and condemned his deed of iniquitous adultery. And for a lawless dance's sake, he is beheaded who preacheth to those in Hades the good tidings of the Resurrection from the dead, and fervently intercedeth with the Lord that our souls be saved.

Despite the clear testimonies of the Holy Scriptures and the explanations of the Saints and Fathers of the Church on our Saviour's descent and preaching to the reposed in Hades, some individuals (see the pamphlet Awake Sleeper – Augmented Edition [Part Two] pp. 27-34) have begun saying that this teaching is un-Orthodox!

This is why we have made a point of quoting directly what our holy Fathers and the liturgical texts of the Church say about this matter. As these texts come to our attention, we will distribute them to you so that you may be well informed about this issue, and not be led astray.