

On the Sunday before we celebrate the baptism of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we hear St. Mark's account of the ministry of the Forerunner of the Messiah - St. John the Baptizer. This morning, I would like us to consider the last phrase from the last verse of the Gospel reading, that St. John baptizes with water, but Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This is a significant distinction, especially as we prepare to celebrate the Feast of our Lord's Theophany, and as we remember and give thanks for our own baptism into Christ

St. Mark's Gospel records (1:4) that St. John came baptizing, and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. The Father's say this second mention of baptism is another baptism, not his own...so he came baptized and preaching of another baptism which was to come for the remission of sin. In Judaism there was and is a type of baptism, a rite of total immersion in specially prepared baths for ritual cleanliness [if you did something that would make you ritually unclean, then you had to go through this rite of immersion]. Baptism for cleanliness. Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism also had to go through this baptismal service. This baptism is not about removing sin or the effects of sin, but of cleansing a person and restoring them to an original state of purity - close to our understanding, but not the same.

So if we understand in St. Mark's Gospel and from history that the baptism of St. John was not for the remission of sins, then what was it? Venerable Bede, in his commentary on this particular passage, writes - "John's baptism is properly called a 'baptism of repentance' because there is no other reason for anyone to want to be baptized in the font of life except for repent[ance]...and even though the baptism of John did not unloose the bonds of sins, nevertheless it was not entirely unfruitful for those who received it. Although it was not given for the forgiveness of sins, it was a sign of faith and repentance. All who were initiated by this were to recall that they should keep themselves from sins, devote themselves to almsgiving, believe in Christ, and as soon as he appeared they were to hasten to his baptism, in which they would be cleansed for the forgiveness of sins."

St. Bede makes clear that the function of St. John's baptism was to call the people to repentance. It wasn't just to make them ritually clean, but a call for them to remain clean, especially from sin. St. John called them to an ascetic life (a life very much like he was living in the desert)- to following the commandments given by God. And their baptism served as a sign and a reminder of their commitment to repent. So John's baptism was not exactly the same as the usual baptism of the Jews. Blessed Theophylact writes in his commentary, "All those who came and were baptized by John, by their repentance were loosed from the bond of their sins when they later believed in Christ...[John's baptism] did not bestow the forgiveness of sins, but instead only led mankind to repentance."

The Orthodox Study Bible, in the commentary on our particular Gospel reading, as well as the commentary regarding St. John from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, provides a succinct

analysis and a segue to the meaning of baptism in Christ. "Confession of sins (repentance) is essential to baptism under both the Old Covenant and the New. John's baptism, however, was a sign of repentance and the forgiveness of sins only. It did not confer the power of total regeneration nor adoption as a child of God as does Christian baptism" (Matthew 3:6). The commentary also notes, "John's baptism did not grant remission of sins once and for all, but prefigured and prepared people for the baptism of Christ which was to come [those baptized by John were later baptized in Christ by the Apostles]. John is a figure of the Law in that, like the Law, he denounced sin but could not remit (lit. 'put away') sin" (Luke 3:3). Both the baptism of St. John and the Law of the Old Covenant point to the One who can remit sin. The Law is fulfilled in the life of Christ - as He accomplishes every jot and tittle and fulfills its every meaning; and the baptism of the Old Covenant is fulfilled when Christ is baptized in the waters of the River Jordan - its potential is realized and made greater.

Baptism in Christ is for cleansing, but not just in ritual, but in fact. And baptism in Christ is much more. In baptism, our sins are remitted, put away, cleansed, forgiven. All of our regeneration and new life and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, for these things to happen we first have to be forgiven and made whole. We're restored to the potential that Adam had in the very beginning of time. Christian baptism confers the power of regeneration and adoption as a child of God. After everything we put God through with our sin and rebellion, He adopts us as His own. Baptism bestows on us the Holy Spirit and the potential to possess all of the various gifts of the spirit. Venerable Bede writes that Christ "pardoned sins by the favor of the Holy Spirit...bestowed the grace of the Holy Spirit...giving of charismatic gifts in the Spirit" We're made to be partakers (even now) of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Christian baptism is not only a rite, and the results are not only of ritual. In Christ there is a new life, a new man born from the waters of the baptismal font. A man now called to preserve the grace of the Holy Spirit poured out on us, called to the same ascetic life that St. John called his followers to - good works, fasting, prayer, and watchfulness. Christ comes to make all things new, and when we were baptized, we were made anew. It's essential for us to remember this re-creation every day, and especially to give thanks and reflect on how we've lived out this new life as we prepare to celebrate our Lord's baptism in the River Jordan by St. John.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!