

First Sunday in the Great Fast *Sunday of Orthodoxy*



What It Means to See Jesus

AT EVERY DIVINE LITURGY during the Great Fast we read from the Holy Gospel according to Mark – except for today. Why is this passage from St John’s Gospel read on this Sunday, the Sunday of Orthodoxy?

The brief answer is that both the Gospel reading and the triumph of Orthodoxy we commemorate today are about seeing God. In the Gospel story we hear how Philip invites Nathaniel to see Jesus (physically); when they meet, Nathaniel sees (spiritually) that Jesus is the Messiah. In the Church we (physically) see icons and see (spiritually) that they reflect the reality of Christ’s incarnation.

Nathaniel Sees God

The story of Jesus’ encounter with Nathaniel is a brief and almost cryptic tale which many have tried to explain. Nathaniel and his friend Philip were both disciples of St John the Forerunner. They had responded to John’s announcement that One was coming “*whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose*” (Jn 1:27). The Lord Jesus had gone to the Jordan where John was baptizing and it is there that John identified Jesus as the Awaited One. “*Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’*” (vv. 35, 36) Philip may have been one of those who heard John’s testimony, so that when Jesus invited Philip to follow Him, he responded positively.

In turn, Philip goes to his friend Nathaniel with the news, “*We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph*” (v. 45). Nathaniel replies laconically, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” (v.46)

Modern commentators generally see this remark of Nathaniel as a somewhat snide dismissal of Jesus because He was a Nazarene. The Fathers approach this passage differently, saying that Nathaniel was saying the exact opposite: that if Jesus was the Awaited One, then He could not have come from Nazareth. St John Chrysostom suggested that Nathaniel “thought within himself that Philip was probably mistaken about the place” and that Jesus “was not from Nazareth” (Hom. 20 on John).

In any case, Philip responds with the same words that Jesus earlier said to Andrew, “*Come and see.*” When Nathaniel finally meets Jesus, the Lord utters another cryptic remark: “*‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!’ Nathanael said to Him, ‘How do You know me?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you’*” (vv. 47, 48).

What was Nathaniel doing under the fig tree? Again many suggestions have been offered; none of them are attested in the Scripture, so we cannot know for sure. One possibility upheld by many in our Tradition is that Nathaniel was praying at that time: *O God of our fathers, send us the One whom You have promised. Send us the Messiah, the Savior.* Faith in the promise of a Savior is what marks out a true Israelite. The Lord, they say, saw him at prayer and He saw Nathaniel's heart. Nathaniel's response marks him as one of the first disciples of Christ, whom He called before His ministry in Galilee.

"You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (v. 49), Nathaniel sees that Jesus is the Messiah and acclaims Him with the traditional titles of a royal Messiah: "Son of God" and "King of Israel."

At the end of His public ministry Jesus' followers would affirm their faith in His heavenly origin: *"See, now You are speaking plainly, and using no figure of speech! Now we are sure that You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came forth from God"* (Jn 16:29, 30). But it would only be after His resurrection, when the risen Christ was manifested to the disciples that the full force of Jesus' words to Nathaniel would be realized: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"* (Jn 1:51). Nathaniel, like the rest of the apostles, would grow to see Jesus not as the earthly conqueror devout Jews were awaiting but as a King not of this world and, ultimately, the eternal Word of God incarnate.

Icons Reveal Christ as God's Image

In the eighth and ninth centuries some Byzantine emperors and churchmen waged a struggle against the use of icons. This conflict was ultimately ended in 843 with the restoration of icons, called in the Church the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Today's observance celebrates this act.

Iconoclasm formally began in the 720s when certain bishops began questioning the excessive way some people were revering icons. In 730 Emperor Leo III took up their cause and issued a decree forbidding the veneration of religious images, "the evil art of painters," as a later iconoclastic council called it. While iconoclasts saw images as a departure from the practice of the early Church, those who supported the veneration of icons did so precisely on the basis of tradition: the Church had done so for years and was not in error.

It was St John of Damascus (676-749) who gave the Church the insight that the use of icons was the logical consequence of the incarnation of Christ. As

he wrote in his Treatise on the Divine Images, "In former times, God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake." St John's teaching became normative in the Byzantine Church which, since the Triumph of Orthodoxy, has in the minds of many become identified as the "Church of Icons."

"But I Can't Fast"

"If there are some gathered here who are hindered by sickness and cannot remain without food, I advise them to reverse their ailment and not to deprive themselves from the fast, but to care for it even more.

"For there exist, there really exist, ways which are even more important than abstinence from food which can open the gates which lead to God with boldness. He, therefore, who eats and cannot fast, let him display richer almsgiving, let him pray more, let him have a more intense desire to hear divine words. Then our physical illness is not a hindrance to our spirit. Let him become reconciled with his enemies, let him distance from his soul every resentment. If he wants to accomplish these things, then he has done the true fast, which is what the Lord asks of us more than anything else.

"It is for this reason that He asks us to abstain from food, in order to place the flesh in subjection to the fulfillment of His commandments, by curbing its impetuous-ness ... If we eat with moderation we should never be ashamed, because the Creator gave us such a body which cannot be supported in any other way except by receiving food. Let us only stop excessive food; that in itself contributes a great deal to the health and well-being of the body."

~ Abridged from St. John Chrysostom homilies "On Fasting"