24 June 2018: Choral Matins
The Birth of John the Baptist
Psalm 149; Malachi 3: 1–6; Luke 3: 1–17
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26 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is the one about whom it is written, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

28 I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ Luke 7:26-28

In nomine…

Behind the high altar at the east end of this Cathedral, as in countless churches, stands an image of the crucified Christ, flanked by Mary, his mother, on the right and John the Evangelist, the beloved disciple, on the left. Based upon the account of the crucifixion in John’s gospel, the altarpiece depicts the dereliction of the Cross, but at the same time shows that it is from this place of utter loss that the Christian hope stems. The dying Christ entrusts Mary to the care of the beloved disciple, and together they form the first seedling of the Church which will multiply across time and space to bring the news of the risen Christ to all lands and ages.

In the Middle Ages this image of Mary and John at the Crucifixion would most commonly have been found on the Rood Loft that divided the nave of the Church from the Chancel: here it would have been the marker on the boundary between death and life, sin and forgiveness, despair and hope, as the faithful made their way beneath it to receive the sacrament of the body and blood of the one who died that we might live.

This image is ubiquitous in the Church of the Catholic West, but in the Orthodox East another triptych is more prominent. In the eastern Church the chief image on the iconostasis that divides the sanctuary from the rest of the church is the icon of the Deisis.
Rather than depicting Mary and John the Evangelist at the crucifixion, this icon depicts Mary and the other John – the Baptist whose birth we celebrate today – standing in reverent prayer, flanking Christ to whom they point. There is a version of it in the middle of the pew sheet. This image is not of the crucified Christ, but of Christ, risen, ascended, glorified and enthroned in heaven, and it is above all an image of prayer: Christ with Mary his mother and John his herald, interceding in heaven for us and for the world. This icon of the Deisis - meaning simply intercession - shows us aspects of the life and ministry of John the Baptist that we in the west commonly overlook.

In western Christianity we think of John the Baptist chiefly as the last and greatest of the prophets and of course we’re right to do so. He stands as the culmination of the long line of Jewish prophets, whose lives and teachings are fulfilled and completed in the life and ministry of Christ: ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets’, says Jesus, ‘I have come not to abolish but to fulfil’ (Mt 5:17). But what the Deisis icon can help us to see is the parallel here with Mary. As the great Russian theologian, Sergius Bulgakov, wrote:

The Forerunner [that is John the Baptist], like the Mother of God [that is Mary], belongs by his origin to the OT, but by his life of grace he belongs to the NT…John is the living boundary, the crest of the watershed; he looks in both directions at the same time, and here he cannot be separated from the [Blessed] Virgin. In Her the law was fulfilled, having revealed its meaning and inner justification. In him it was accomplished in order to die into new life (The Friend of the Bridegroom, p.4).

It’s for this reason that in the prologue to John’s gospel, after the great crescendo that peaks with the incarnation of Christ – ‘and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’ – the next verse returns to John the Baptist. This passage is familiar to us at Christmas as the gospel at Midnight Mass, but the passage we hear then is a truncated excerpt that edits out the reference back to the Baptist:

[v14] And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. [v15] (John testified to him and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.”’) [v16] From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John1:14-16).

Bulgakov describes this first chapter of John’s gospel as a heavenly prologue to set alongside the earthly prologue of Luke’s gospel; the role played by John the Baptist in
John’s gospel parallels that of the Virgin Mary in Luke. And, as Bulgakov goes on to show in his wonderful book on John the Baptist, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, the parallels between Mary and John are manifold. In western Catholic theology we are accustomed to dwelling deeply on the significance of Mary’s *fiat*, her yes to God in response to the angel’s annunciation: ‘**Be it unto me according to thy word**’. But a similar dynamic is found with John the Baptist too: he has his own *fiat*, his yes to God:

Just as in the chamber in Nazareth [writes Bulgakov] the fate of the world was being decided by the Virgin Mary’s answer to the archangel’s annunciation, so in the Jordan desert, in the Forerunner’s awareness about himself, in the hidden movements of his heart, when he was asked whether he was the Christ, the same question was being decided: Was the world ready to receive Christ?... [Like Mary] John represented then all of humankind, whose fate was being decided in his heart.

Like the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist shows true humility: their humility is not servile, it simply wishes to serve; it is not self-abasing, it just places the self fully at the disposal of other people – and, in their case, not just of other people, but of the whole human race, whose salvation is set free by their yes to God.

Thus it is – as again Bulgakov shows – that the divine Trinity works through them. The Holy Spirit overshadows Mary, the Son is born of her and the Father is revealed in them; so likewise with John at the baptism of Christ:

By the baptism that he conferred, the Holy Spirit descended upon the One being baptized; and, in baptizing, the Baptist learn[ed and revealed] the mystery of the Incarnation and that of the Holy Trinity. (p.69)

By their place in the work of salvation, both Mary and John are God-bearers, *Theotokoi*, those by whose lives God is made manifest to us.

By hearing the Father’s voice, by seeing with his eyes the divine Spirit, John the Forerunner, having placed on thee, O Christ, his hand… he is a God-bearer. [Bulgakov, p.141]

‘**What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?**

Like reeds shaken by the wind, both the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist are easily overlooked, the significance of their ministry overshadowed and subsumed by what they enable.
But despite his humility, his pointing beyond himself to the One who is God – or, more accurately, because of his humility, his pointing beyond himself to the One who is God, the Orthodox Church reveres John the Baptist as the friend of the Bridegroom, the peak of humanity in relationship with God incarnate, greatest among human beings; and does so on no less authority than that of Christ himself:

This is the one about whom it is written,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”
I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ (Luke 7:26-28)

Or, in the words of the hymn we have just sung:

His mighty deeds exalt his fame
To greater than a prophet’s name.
Of woman-born shall never be
A greater prophet than was he.

And yet, despite this, because of this, the honour is due not to him but:

To God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, Three in One,
Praise, honour, might and glory be
From age to age eternally. Amen.