



## Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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### *The Issue of Greatest Importance* May 10, 2020

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**Christ is risen! Indeed He is Risen!**

**Brothers and Sisters in Christ,**

*Of old an Angel came down to the Sheep's Pool and healed one man every year, but now Christ doth cleanse endless multitudes by divine Baptism. (Canon, Ode 1. Matins for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pascha).*

There's an expression that people often use when they want to point out the relative importance of issues. In the face of an issue of overwhelming importance they chastise those who are focusing instead on something of less value. The expression goes like this: "Stop arranging the deck chairs as the Titanic sinks!" In other words, pay attention to the issue of greater importance instead of the one of less importance.

The quote from Ode 1 of the Matins Canon for this Sunday conveys the same message. In the Gospel lesson Christ is present on the Sabbath Day at a well-known pool in Jerusalem, the Pool of Bethesda, into which people would go to bathe ritually and be healed. It was believed that when the waters were stirred, an angel of the Lord was present to heal the first to descend into the pool. Around the pool beneath five porches, St. John says, there was a "multitude of

invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed” (John 1:4). One of them a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, is asked by Jesus if he wished to be healed. The man replies with the classic “Catch-22” description of his problem, that when the waters are stirred, he cannot get up and get in to be healed, since he is paralyzed. Jesus immediately heals him, even though it is the Sabbath, and when questioned about why He healed on the Sabbath, makes a stunning statement of His own identity as God Incarnate. He says, “My Father is working still (even though it is the Sabbath), and I am working.” The use of the words, “I AM,” of course point to His own identity as the incarnate God Almighty, the One Who revealed Himself to Moses as the Great I AM, Yahweh.

St. John, of course, is always interested in conveying to His community in the Fourth Gospel the truth about the meaning behind our Lord’s actions and words. This sign, the third sign (which is what St. John calls the miracles), is a sign, a pointer or a reminder of the power of Holy Baptism and the meaning of Holy Baptism through one’s union with the Lord of eternal life, and health. The word salvation, of course, comes from the Latin word for health, for it denotes ultimate health, health that can be known only when one is united to the Eternal Three-In-One. St. John reminds his readers that it is only through union with Jesus Christ in Baptism that eternal health can be achieved and nourished in a life lived in union with the Master. As such, he reports that stern warning to the healed man, “See, you are well! Sin no more that nothing worse befall you” John 5:14).

This Gospel lesson that we will hear (or read in our current situation) is a strong reminder to pay attention to what really matters. All around us lie the sick, the paralyzed, the lame. Over a million people have been infected by the coronavirus, over 70,000 have died in our country alone. We all pray for a cure and for the discovery of a working vaccine to protect us. But in a sense, this problem is of less concern than the larger problem of the eternal destiny and direction of our lives. Sin, Brothers and Sisters, separates us from God, apart from Whom there is no eternal health or salvation. What does it matter if we are cured of the coronavirus and return to lives of sin? It’s like arranging the deck chairs as the Titanic sinks around us. What we must be most concerned about in our lives is our relationship with the One Who alone can give us life after death, eternal Life with Him. This, among other things, is what our lesson reminds us of on this Fourth Sunday of Pascha. Only in Christ is there health and salvation eternally; only in Him, joined first to us in Holy Baptism and then week by week in Holy Eucharist, is there hope for eternal life. Everything else by comparison is of secondary importance.

Our Lord said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all else shall be yours as well” (Matthew 6:33). St. John is ever mindful of this truth and reminds his community and the readers of his Fourth Gospel of it every chance he can. Let us of course pray for a cure of the dreadful virus among us; let us take every reasonable precaution to protect one another from

it. But above all, let us see to our eternal salvation through the One Who united Himself to each of us in Holy Baptism and Who continues to draw us to Him through the Holy Spirit in a pure and constant union. This, above all, should be our goal and the purpose of our lives.

**Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!**

Fr. Elias

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