

Commentary of St. John Chrysostom on John 1:28, 29



Homily XVII of St. John Chrysostom on John 1:28, 29

“These things were done in Bethany beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day he seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

[1.] "A GREAT virtue is boldness and freedom of speech, and the making all things second in importance to the confessing of Christ; so great and admirable, that the Only-begotten Son of God proclaims such an one in the presence of the Father. ([Luke xii. 8.](#)) Yet the recompense is more than just, for thou confessest upon earth, He in heaven, thou in the presence of men, He before the Father and all the angels.

Such an one was John, who regarded not the multitude, nor opinion, nor anything else belonging to men, but trod all this beneath his feet, and proclaimed to all with becoming freedom the things respecting Christ. And therefore the Evangelist marks the very place, to show the boldness of the loud-voiced herald. For it was not in a house, not in a corner, not in the wilderness, but in the midst of the multitude, after that he had occupied Jordan, when all that were baptized by him were present, (for the Jews came upon him as he was baptizing,) there it was that he proclaimed aloud that wonderful confession concerning Christ, full of those sublime and great and mysterious doctrines, and that he was not worthy to unloose the latchet of His shoe. Wherefore he saith, “These things were done in Bethany,” or, as all the more correct copies have it, “in Bethabara.” For Bethany was not

“beyond Jordan,” nor bordering on the wilderness, but somewhere nigh to Jerusalem.

He marks the places also for another reason. Since he was not about to relate matters of old date, but such as had come to pass but a little time before, he makes those who were present and had beheld, witnesses of his words, and supplies proof from the places themselves. For confident that nothing was added by himself to what was said, but that he simply and with truth described things as they were, he draws a testimony from the places, which, as I said, would be no common demonstration of his veracity.

“The next day he seeth Jesus coming to him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

The Evangelists distributed the periods amongst them; and Matthew having cut short his notice of the time before John the Baptist was bound, hastens to that which follows, while the Evangelist John not only does not cut short this period, but dwells most on it. Matthew, after the return of Jesus from the wilderness, saying nothing of the intermediate circumstances, as what John spake, and what the Jews sent and said, and having cut short all the rest, passes immediately to the prison. “For,” saith he, “Jesus having heard” that John was betrayed, “departed thence.” ([Matt. xiv. 13.](#)) But John does not so. He is silent as to the journey into the wilderness, as having been described by Matthew; but he relates what followed the descent from the mountain, and after having gone through many circumstances, adds, “For John was not yet cast into prison.” ([c. iii. 24.](#))

And wherefore, says one, does Jesus now come to him? why does he come not merely once, but this second time also? For Matthew says that His coming was necessary on account of Baptism: since Jesus adds, that “thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” ([Matt. iii. 15.](#)) But John says that He came again after Baptism, and declares it in this place, for, “I saw,” saith he, “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and It abode upon Him.” Wherefore then did He come to John? for He came not casually, but went expressly to him. “John,” saith the Evangelist, “seeth Jesus coming unto him.” Then wherefore cometh He? In order that since John had baptized Him with many (others), no one might suppose that He had hastened to John for the same reason as the rest to confess sins, and to wash in the river unto repentance. For this He comes, to give John an opportunity of setting this opinion right again, for by saying, “Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world,” he removes the whole suspicion. For very plain it is that One so pure as to be able to wash away the sins of others, does not come to confess sins, but to give opportunity to that marvelous herald to impress what he had said more definitely on those who had heard his former words, and to add others besides. The word

“Behold” is used, because many had been seeking Him by reason of what had been said, and for a long time. For this cause, pointing Him out when present, he said, “Behold,” this is He so long sought, this is “the Lamb.” He calls Him “Lamb,” to remind the Jews of the prophecy of Isaiah, and of the shadow under the law of Moses, that he may the better lead them from the type to the reality. That Lamb of Moses took not at once away the sin of any one; but this took away the sin of all the world; for when it was in danger of perishing, He quickly delivered it from the wrath of God.

Ver. 30. “This is He of whom I said, He that cometh after me is preferred before me.”

[2.] Seest thou here also how he interprets the word “before”? for having called Him “Lamb,” and that He “taketh away the sin of the world,” then he saith that “He is preferred before me, for He was before me”; declaring that this is the “before,” the taking upon Him the sins of the world, “and the baptizing with the Holy [Spirit].” “For my coming had no farther object than to proclaim the common Benefactor of the world, and to afford the baptism of water; but His was to cleanse all men, and to give them the power of the Comforter.” “He is preferred before me,” that is to say, has appeared brighter than I, because “He was before me.” Let those who have admitted the madness of Paul of Samosata be ashamed when they withstand so manifest a truth.

Ver. 31. “And I knew Him not,” he saith.

Here he renders his testimony free from suspicion, by showing that it was not from human friendship, but had been caused by divine revelation. “I knew Him not,” he saith. How then couldest thou be a trustworthy witness? How shalt thou teach others, while thou thyself art ignorant? He did not say “I know Him not,” but, “I knew Him not”; so that in this way he would be shown most trustworthy; for why should he have shown favor to one of whom he was ignorant?

“But that He should be made manifest unto Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.”

He then did not need baptism, nor had that laver any other object than to prepare for all others a way to faith on Christ. For he did not say, “that I might cleanse those who are baptized,” or, “that I might deliver them from their sins,” but, “that He should be made manifest unto Israel.” “And why, tell me, could he not without baptism have preached and brought the multitudes to Him?” But in this way it would not have been by any means easy. For they would not so all have run together, if the preaching had been without the baptism; they would not by the comparison have learned His superiority. For the multitude came together not to hear his words, but for what? To be “baptized, confessing their sins.”

But when they came, they were taught the matters concerning Christ, and the difference of His baptism. Yet even this of John was of greater dignity than the Jewish, and therefore all ran to it; yet even so it was imperfect.

“How then didst thou know Him?” “By the descent of the Spirit,” he saith. But again, lest any one should suppose that he was in need of the Spirit as we are, hear how he removes the suspicion, by showing that the descent of the Spirit was only to declare Christ. For having said, “And I knew Him not,” he adds, “But He that sent me to baptize with water the Same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizeth with the Holy [Spirit].” ([Ver. 33.](#))

Seest thou that this was the work of the Spirit, to point out Christ? The testimony of John was indeed not to be suspected, but wishing to make it yet more credible, he leads it up to God and the Holy Spirit. For when John had testified to a thing so great and wonderful, so fit to astonish all his hearers, that He alone took on Him the sins of all the world, and that the greatness of the gift sufficed for so great a ransom, afterwards he proves this assertion. And the proof is that He is the Son of God, and that He needed not baptism, and that the object of the descent of the Spirit was only to make Him known. For it was not in the power of John to give the Spirit, as those who were baptized by him show when they say, “We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy [Spirit].” ([Acts xix. 2.](#)) In truth, Christ needed not baptism, neither his nor any other; but rather baptism needed the power of Christ. For that which was wanting was the crowning blessing of all, that he who was baptized should be deemed worthy of the Spirit; this free gift then of the Spirit He added when He came.

[Ver. 32-34.](#) “And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from the heaven like a dove, and It abode upon Him. And I knew Him not: but He that sent me to baptize with water, the Same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizeth with the Holy [Spirit]. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.”

He puts the “I knew Him not” repeatedly. On what account, and wherefore? He was His kinsman according to the flesh. “Behold,” saith the angel, “thy cousin Elisabeth, she also hath received a son.” ([Luke i. 36.](#)) That therefore he might not seem to favor Him because of the relationship, he repeats the “I knew Him not.” And this happened with good reason; for he had passed all his time in the wilderness away from his father’s house.

How then, if he knew Him not before the descent of the Spirit, and if he then for the first time recognized Him, did he forbid Him before baptism, saying, “I have need to be

baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?" ([Matt. iii. 14](#)), since this was a proof that he knew Him very well. Yet he knew Him not before or for a long time, and with good cause; for the marvels which took place when He was a child, as the circumstances of the Magi and others the like, had happened long before, while John himself was very young, and since much time had elapsed in the interval, He was naturally unknown to all. For had He been known, John would not have said, "That He should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing."



St. John the Forerunner telling his followers (including the Apostle Andrew): "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." (taken from:

<http://www.freemonks.gr/pdf/bioi/5.pdf>)

[3.] Hence it remains clear to us, that the miracles which they say belong to Christ's childhood, are false, and the inventions of certain who bring them into notice. For if He had begun from His early age to work wonders, neither could John have been ignorant of Him, nor would the multitude have needed a teacher to make Him known. But now he says, that for this he is come, "that He might be made manifest to Israel"; and for this reason he said again, "I have need to be baptized of Thee." Afterwards, as having gained more exact knowledge of Him, he proclaimed Him to the multitude, saying, "This is He of whom I said, After me cometh a Man which is preferred before me." For "He who sent me to baptize with water," and sent me for this end, "that He should be made manifest to Israel," Himself revealed Him even before the descent of the Spirit. Wherefore even before He came, John said, "One cometh after me who is preferred before me." He knew Him not before he came to Jordan and baptized all men, but when He was about to be baptized, then he knew Him; and this from the Father revealing Him to the Prophet, and the Spirit showing Him when He was being baptized to the Jews, for whose sake indeed the descent of the Spirit took place. For that the witness of John might not be despised who said, that "He was before me," and that "He baptizeth with the Spirit," and that "He judgeth the world," the Father utters a Voice proclaiming the Son, and the Spirit descends, directing that Voice to the Head of Jesus. For since one was baptizing, the other receiving baptism, the Spirit comes to correct the idea which some of those present might form, that the words were spoken of John. So that when he says, "I knew Him not," he speaks of former time, not that near to His baptism. Otherwise how could he have forbidden Him, saying, "I

have need to be baptized of Thee”? How could he have said such words concerning Him?

“But,” says one, “how then did not the Jews believe? for it was not John only that saw the Spirit in the likeness of a dove.” It was, because, even if they did see, such things require not only the eyes of the body, but more than these, the vision of the understanding, to prevent men from supposing the whole to be a vain illusion. For if when they saw Him working wonders, touching with His own hands the sick and the dead, and so bringing them back to life and health, they were so drunk with malice as to declare the contrary of what they saw; how could they shake off their unbelief by the descent of the Spirit only? And some say, that they did not all see it, but only John and those of them who were better disposed. Because even though it were possible with fleshly eyes to see the Spirit descending as in the likeness of a dove, still not for this was it absolutely necessary that the circumstance should be visible to all. For Zacharias saw many things in a sensible form, as did Daniel and Ezekiel, and had none to share in what they saw; Moses also saw many things such as none other hath seen; nor did all the disciples enjoy the view of the Transfiguration on the mount, nor did they all alike behold Him at the time of the Resurrection. And this Luke plainly shows, when he says, that He showed Himself “to witnesses chosen before of God.” ([Acts x. 41.](#))

“And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.”

Where did he “bear record that this is the Son of God?” he called Him indeed “Lamb,” and said that He should “baptize with the Spirit,” but nowhere did he say of Him, “Son of God.” But the other Evangelists do not write that He said anything after the baptism, but having been silent as to the time intervening, they mention the miracles of Christ which were done after John’s captivity, whence we may reasonably conjecture that these and many others are omitted. And this our Evangelist himself has declared, at the end of his narrative. For they were so far from inventing anything great concerning Him, that the things which seem to bring reproach, these they have all with one voice and with all exactness set down, and you will not find one of them omitting one of such circumstances; but of the miracles, part some have left for the others to relate, part all have passed over in silence.

I say not this without cause, but to answer the shamelessness of the heathen. For this is a sufficient proof of their truth-loving disposition, and that they say nothing for favor. And thus as well as in other ways you may arm yourselves for trial of argument with them. But take heed. Strange were it that the physician, or the shoemaker, or the weaver, in short all artists, should be able each to contend correctly for his own art, but that one

calling himself Christian should not be able to give a reason for his own faith; yet those things if overlooked bring only loss to men's property, these if neglected destroy our very souls. Yet such is our wretched disposition, that we give all our care to the former, and the things which are necessary, and which are the groundwork of our salvation, as though of little worth, we despise.

[4.] That it is which prevents the heathen from quickly deriding his own error. For when they, though established in a lie, use every means to conceal the shamefulness of their opinions, while we, the servants of the truth, cannot even open our mouths, how can they help condemning the great weakness of our doctrine? how can they help suspecting our religion to be fraud and folly? how shall they not blaspheme Christ as a deceiver, and a cheat, who used the folly of the many to further his fraud? And we are to blame for this blasphemy, because we will not be wakeful in arguments for godliness, but deem these things superfluous, and care only for the things of earth. He who admires a dancer or a charioteer, or one who contends with beasts, uses every exertion and contrivance not to come off worst in any disputes concerning him, and they string together long panegyrics, as they compose their defense against those who find fault with them, and cast sneers without number at their opponents: but when arguments for Christianity are proposed, they all hang their heads, and scratch themselves, and gape, and retire at length the objects of contempt.

Must not this deserve excessive wrath, when Christ is shown to be less honorable in your estimation than a dancer? since you have contrived ten thousand defenses for the things they have done, though more disgraceful than any, but of the miracles of Christ, though they have drawn to Him the world, you cannot bear even to think or care at all. We believe in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy [Spirit], in the Resurrection of bodies, and in Life everlasting. If now any heathen say, "What is this Father, what this Son, what this Holy [Spirit]? How do you who say that there are three Gods, charge us with having many Gods?" What will you say? What will you answer? How will you repel the attack of these arguments? But what if when you are silent, the unbeliever should again propose this other question, and ask, "What in a word is resurrection? Shall we rise again in this body? or in another, different from this? If in this, what need that it be dissolved?" What will you answer? And what, if he say, "Why did Christ come now and not in old time? Has it seemed good to Him now to care for men, and did He despise us during all the years that are past?" Or if he ask other questions besides, more than these? for I must not propose many questions, and be silent as to the answers to them, lest, in so doing, I harm the simpler

among you. What has been already said is sufficient to shake off your slumbers. Well then, if they ask these questions, and you absolutely cannot even listen to the words, shall we, tell me, suffer trifling punishment only, when we have been the cause of such error to those who sit in darkness? I wished, if you had sufficient leisure, to bring before you all the book of a certain impure heathen philosopher written against us, and that of another of earlier date, that so at least I might have roused you, and led you away from your exceeding slothfulness. For if they were wakeful that they might say these things against us, what pardon can we deserve, if we do not even know how to repel the attacks made upon us? For what purpose have we been brought forward? Dost thou not hear the Apostle say, "Be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you"? ([1 Pet. iii. 15.](#)) And Paul exhorts in like manner, saying, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." ([Col. iii. 16.](#)) What do they who are more slothful than drones reply to this? "Blessed is every simple soul," and, "he that walketh simply walketh surely." ([Prov. x. 8.](#)) For this is the cause of all sorts of evil, that the many do not know how to apply rightly even the testimony of the Scriptures. Thus in this place, the writer does not mean (by "simple") the man who is foolish, or who knows nothing, but him who is free from wickedness, who is no evil-doer, who is wise. If it were not so, it would have been useless to say, "Be ye wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." ([Matt. x. 16.](#)) But why should I name these things, when the discourse comes in quite out of place? For besides the things already mentioned, other matters are not right with us, those, I mean, which concern our life and conversation. We are in every way wretched and ridiculous, ever ready to find fault with each other, but slow to correct in ourselves things for which we blame and accuse our neighbor. Wherefore I exhort you, that now at least we attend to ourselves, and stop not at the finding fault, (this is not enough to appease God;) but that we show forth a change in every way most excellent, in order that having lived here to the glory of God, we may enjoy the glory to come; which may it come to pass that we will all attain, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

(taken from: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.iv.xix.html>)