

SERMON ON THE FEAST OF ST JOHN OF SHANGHAI 2007

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

What can we say of St John, our beloved Shepherd, who guides our Russian Church in these difficult times in these islands? Let us first remind ourselves of a few facts about his life:

St John was born 111 years ago on 4 June 1896 in Kharkov in southern Russia and baptized Michael. He studied in Poltava and at the Kharkov Law School, but on emigrating studied at the Belgrade Theological Seminary until 1925. Then he became a teacher of religion at a Serbian State High School, until in 1926 he was tonsured a monk, with the name John and ordained hieromonk. From 1929-1934 he taught at the Theological Seminary in Bitol, but in 1934 was consecrated Bishop for the See of Shanghai. Here he remained until the end of World War II, suffering with his flock at the hands of the Japanese.

In 1946 he became Archbishop and in 1949 went to America to arrange for the immigration of his flock, which had found temporary refuge in the Philippines from Communist regimes. Others of his flock later fled to Australia. In 1950 he was appointed head of the Western European Diocese, with responsibility also for England and the Russian churches in North Africa. It was at one of these churches that a photograph was taken of St John, showing him surrounded by a halo of light. In 1962 St John was appointed Archbishop of Western America and San Francisco, at a time of great difficulty there, and in 1966 he reposed in Seattle.

St John has therefore many titles: Of Shanghai; of Western Europe, where he spent 12 years; of San Francisco. Here we call him 'Archbishop in London'. Given all these titles, he is often known as 'the Wonderworker'. Today, however, I would like to add yet another title: **'St John the Prophet'**.

What is a Prophet? A prophet is one who crosses the barrier of created time and enters into uncreated eternity. Thus, past, present and future become one for the prophet. To show you what I mean, I would like to give you some examples of his sayings, which in the light of the historic and blessed events between the two parts of the Russian Church in the last few weeks we can only call prophecies:

Firstly, the Address of Hieromonk John on his consecration as Bishop of Shanghai on 27 May 1934 in Belgrade:

'Even outside her borders, we remain sons of Russia. Exiled from our earthly homeland, we continue to be the spiritual flock of the hierarchs Peter, Alexis, Jonah, Philip, Hermogenes and Tikhon. We are still part of the suffering and persecuted Russian Church, now soaked in the blood of the hieromartyrs Vladimir of Kiev, Benjamin of Petrograd, Hermogenes of Tobolsk, Mitrofan of Astrakhan, Andronicus of Perm, and a countless host of other new martyrs and hieromartyrs. Their testament is our sacred treasure which we must preserve until such a time as it pleases God to reveal His might and raise the horn of Orthodox Christians. Until then we must remain in spiritual unity with the persecuted and strengthen them with our prayers.

Although absent from them, we kiss their bonds, and we grieve for those who have wavered. We know that even the ancient confessors of the truth sometimes wavered. But we have examples of steadfastness: Saint Theodore the Studite, who condemned any departure from the Church's teachings, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Patriarch Hermogenes. We dread to slip from the path they trod, for if human weakness can be used to justify those beneath the yoke of terror, what can we say if we are frightened by mere threats? Living in comparative security, we should strengthen ourselves spiritually in order to re-create what has been destroyed, 'to turn back the captivity of Sion', if the Lord so allows, or ourselves to walk in the footsteps of those who are suffering for the truth - if it should be necessary.

For this reason we must above all preserve among ourselves oneness of mind and unity, presenting a unified Russian Church, and at the same time continue her vital work among other peoples. From the very first centuries of Russia's acceptance of Christianity, she sent forth missionaries to distant parts. First to shine forth were the righteous Kuksha and Leonty of Rostov, afterwards Stephen of Perm, Innocent of Irkutsk, and in our time Macarius - Apostle to the Altai, and Nicholas of Japan. Now the scattered Russian people have come to spread the Faith in all corners of the world. The task of the Russian Church Outside Russia is to occupy herself with the work of enlightening as many people as possible from all nations. It is for this purpose that the Synod of Russian Hierarchs Outside Russia is sending me to a country from which rises the material sun, but which is in need of the illuminating rays of the spiritual Sun of Righteousness'.

His second prophetic address is contained in his Report to the Second Church Council of the Church Outside Russia in 1938:

'Russians abroad have been given to shine with the light of Orthodoxy throughout the world in order that other peoples, seeing their good works, might glorify our Father Who is in heaven, and in so doing Russians will draw nearer to salvation. By not fulfilling this task and even degrading Orthodoxy by its life, the Diaspora has before it two paths: either to turn to the path of repentance and, beseeching God's forgiveness and renewing itself spiritually, to make itself capable of giving rebirth to our suffering homeland, or to be finally cut off by God and remain in exile, persecuted by everyone, until, gradually degenerating, it disappears from the face of the earth'.

The third address is his Epistle of 1948 to his flock in Shanghai:

'When at last comes freedom from atheist government, then there will be rejoicing and triumph at the restoration of the Russian Church. We pray to the Lord, that He will hasten the coming of that long-desired and awaited hour, when the First Hierarch of All Russia, going up to his Patriarchal place in the Cathedral of the Dormition in Moscow, will gather around him all the Russian Archpastors, come from all the Russian and foreign lands'.

The words of this Epistle were fulfilled on Sunday 20 May this year when hierarchs from the Church Outside Russia did indeed gather around His Holiness in the Cathedral of the Dormition in Moscow. From Sydney, from San Francisco, from New York, from Munich, from Geneva, they came, 'from all the Russian and foreign lands'.

Finally, I would quote in Russian and in English from his Epistle of 1954, written here in Western Europe:

Блаженна ты, Земля Русская, очищаемая огнём страдания! Прошла ты воду крещения, проходишь ты ныне через огонь страдания, увидишь и ты в покой. Некогда с благоговением собирали христиане песок в Колизее, напоенный мученической кровью. Места страданий и кончины мучеников делались священными и особо чтимыми. А ныне вся Русь есть поприще страстотерпцев. Земля её освятилась их кровью, а воздух её – восходом душ их на небо. Ей, Священна ты Русь! Прав был древний писатель, сказавший, что ты – Третий Рим и четвёртому не быти. Ты превзошла древний Рим множеством подвигов мучеников, та превзошла и крестивший тя Рим своим стоянием в Православии, и ты останешься непревзойдённой до кончины мира. Лишь освящённая страданиями и земной жизнью Богочеловека земля святее тебя в очах православных.

'Thou art blessed, Russian Land, cleansed by the fire of suffering! Thou hast passed through the water of baptism, now thou goest through the fire of suffering, into thy rest. Once, in the Coliseum Christians reverently gathered the sand soaked by the blood of martyrs. The places of suffering and repose of the martyrs were made sacred and were especially honoured. And now

all Rus is the field of passion-bearers. Her Land has been hallowed by their blood and her air hallowed by the ascension of their souls into the heavens. **Indeed, thou, Rus art sacred! He who of old wrote, 'Thou art the Third Rome and there will be no Fourth', wrote true.** Thou hast surpassed ancient Rome through the multitude of the feats of the martyrs, surpassed the Rome that baptized thee by standing firm in Orthodoxy, and thou wilt remain unsurpassed until the end of the world. In Orthodox eyes, only the land which was hallowed by the sufferings and the earthly life of the God-Man is holier than thee'.

Of the fulfilment of these words I am a living witness. On Saturday 19 May this year in the new church at Butovo, to the south-east of Moscow, on the killing-grounds where thousands of New Martyrs died for Christ between 1937 and 1938, we concelebrated with His Holiness. Two altars were dedicated. One was dedicated to St our John of Shanghai, another to the New Martyrs. In the main altar, six of us priests raised up the top of the Holy Table, as it was consecrated. One of us was from Argentina, one from Seattle, one from Berlin, one from Texas, one, born in China, from New Zealand, and myself from the back of beyond in England.

At these events, prophesied by St John, today, in this the only church dedicated to St John in Western Europe, we cry:

Holy Hierarch and Prophet Father John, Pray to God for us!

Amen.

<http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/sermpfst.htm>