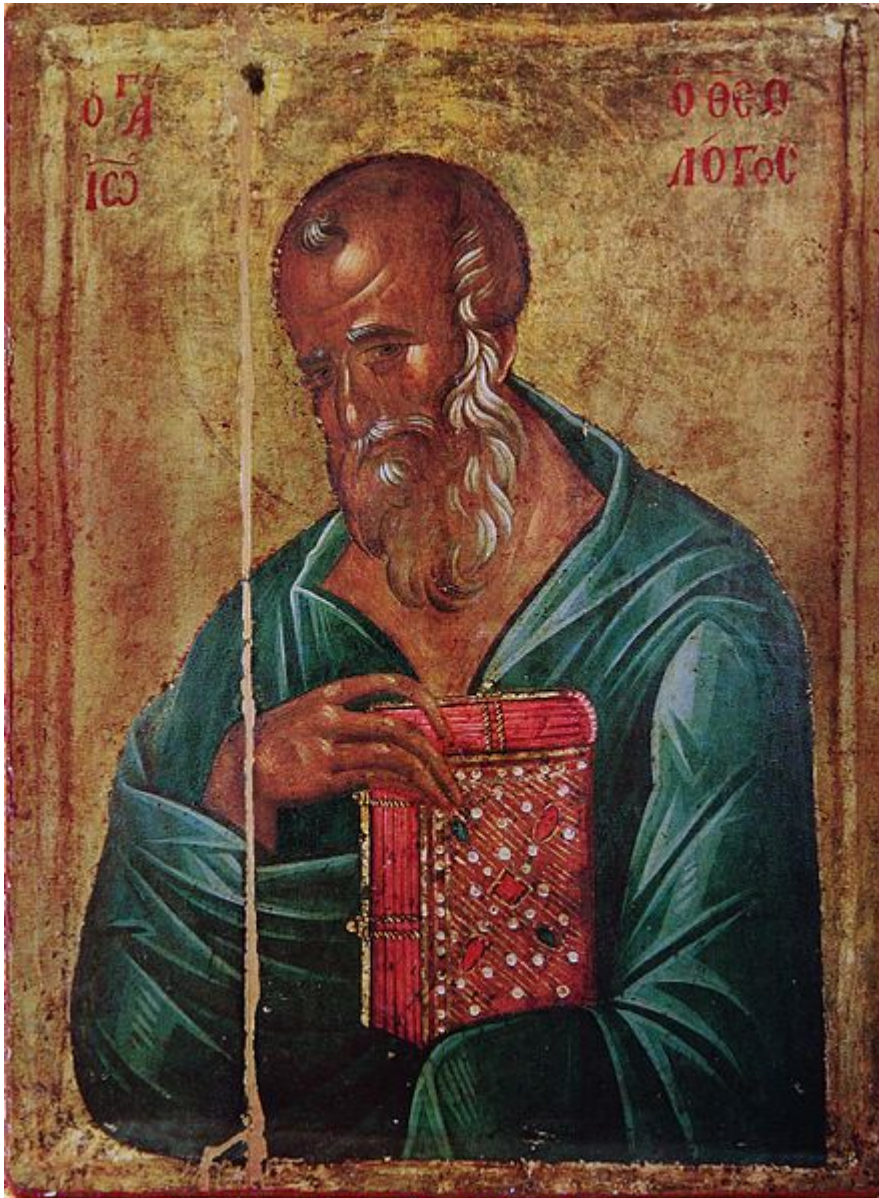


We Have Seen (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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St. John the Evangelist

St. John, in the prologue of his gospel, says the following:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:14).

In his first Epistle he says the following:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us — that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship [koinonia: communion] with us; and our fellowship [koinonia: communion] is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3).

In a very similar vein, one of the hymns for Pentecost Sunday proclaims:

We have seen the true light! We have received the heavenly Spirit! We have found the true Faith! Worshipping the undivided Trinity, who has saved us.

This same hymn is sung every Sunday as part of the Divine Liturgy.

All of these share in common a similar theme – our witness of Christ is not a testimony to an idea or to a theory about an idea or story. The witness of the Church is rooted in our experiential knowledge of God. St. John does confine himself in his prologue to the mere “literal” witness of “the tomb was empty.” This, of course, is part of the witness. But the greater witness is to the communion with God found in knowing the risen Christ. “The word of life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us...” The risen Christ is known not only as the one raised from the dead, but is understood as the “word of life...the eternal life which was with the Father.”

This understanding transcends the “bare facts” of a newspaper account – indeed the witness of Scripture is that the one who was raised from the dead is none other than the Word of Life, Eternal Life with the Father. This realization is contained in the confession of faith of every Christian: “Jesus is Lord.”

All theology finds its proper root in this true knowledge of God. It should never be mere speculation based on a rational system of thought – but rather the unfolding of the mystery made known to us in the risen Christ. The hunger for this true knowledge of God is the very core of the Christian life: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

The safeguarding of saving knowledge (true participation in the life of God) is the purpose of all doctrine. Every dogmatic statement of the Church has as its sole purpose the safeguarding of true participation in the life of God. Dogma is not an

argument over ideas, but a statement that guards the Apostolic witness (which is living and true).

I ran across the following story from the Desert Fathers (in the parish newsletter, The Light, of Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church in Webster, MA, edited by Fr. Luke Veronis – my thanks):

There is a story from the Desert Fathers about a young monk who asked one of the holy men of the desert why it is that so many people came out to the desert to seek God and yet most of them gave up after a short time and returned to their lives in the city.

The old monk responded:

“Last evening my dog saw a rabbit running for cover among the bushes of the desert and he began to chase the rabbit, barking loudly. Soon other dogs joined the chase, barking and running. They ran a great distance and alerted many other dogs. Soon the wilderness was echoing the sounds of their pursuit but the chase went on into the night.

After a little while, many of the dogs grew tired and dropped out. A few chased the rabbit until the night was nearly spent. By morning, only my dog continued the hunt.”

“Do you understand,” the old man said, “what I have told you?”

“No,” replied the young monk, “please tell me, father.”

“It is simple,” said the desert father, “my dog saw the rabbit!”

By Fr. Stephen Freeman

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