

THE FEAST OF THE PROPHET ELIJAH IN THE COMMUNITY OF MAALOULE

On Saturday, July 22/August 5, 2023, the feast of the prophet Elijah was celebrated by the Patriarchate in his Holy Temple, in the village of Maaloule, near Nazareth.

This Holy Church belonged to the Greek-Orthodox Arabic-speaking Community of Maaloule, it was abandoned due to the events during the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and it was maintained during the last years by the Patriarchate and His Eminence the Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth with the funding of the Hegoumen of Tabor Archimandrite Hilarion, with the permission of the Israeli army and a Divine Liturgy is celebrated in it during the feast of the Prophet Elijah.

In this well-preserved Church, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated by H.H.B. our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos, and their Eminences, the Metropolitans, Kyriakos of Nazareth and Isychios of Kapitolias, and Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina, the Elder Kamarasis Archimandrite Nectarios, Fr. Simeon of the Holy Metropolis of Nazareth, at the chanting of the Acre Byzantine choir and that of Nazareth, as the service was attended by many Arabic-speaking faithful Christians, descendants of the founders of the Church and others from Nazareth.

Before the Holy Communion, His Beatitude delivered the following Sermon:

“When thou wast united unto our God through thy virtue and unspotted life, O Prophet of renown, and hadst for this cause received from Him authority and power, then thou didst change creation as seemed good to thee, and by thy will didst shut

the gates of rain on high; and thou didst bring fire down from above, wholly consuming and impious. Do thou entreat Christ the Saviour that our souls be saved" (Matins, praises, Troparion 1).

Beloved brethren in Christ,

Reverend Christians and pilgrims

"The incarnate Angel and the prophet's summit and boast, Elijah the glorious", has gathered us all in this holy place to celebrate his holy commemoration of his fiery ascension into the heavens in Eucharist.

Praising the character of Elijah of Thesbis, Sirach says about him: "Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch. He brought a famine upon them, and by his zeal he made them few in number. By the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens, and also three times brought down fire. How glorious you were, Elijah, in your wondrous deeds! Whose glory is equal to yours?" (Sirach 48,1-4).

Saint James the Brother of God, referring to the power of the righteous man's prayer says in his catholic epistle: "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest" (James 5,16-18).

And Luke and Mark the Evangelists mention the presence of the Prophet Elijah during the Lord's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor: "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one[a] on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus" (Mark 9,2-4/ Luke 9,28-30).

The conversation among Elijah, Moses and Jesus testifies to the fact that Christ is the Lord of the Law of Moses and of the prophets and Moses appears as the representative of the Law, while Elijah is the representative of the prophets according to the interpretation of Origen and of Saint Cyril of Alexandria. "Moses appears as the man of the Law, while Elijah as that of the prophets; for He [Christ] is the Lord of the Law and of the Prophets".

Elijah was distinguished to the extent that he was the only one of the prophets, after Moses to converse with the Transfigured Christ, the Christ that they both knew on Mount Sinai; Moses knew Him as "fire and steam and darkness", while Elijah like "fine breeze of thin air" (3 Kings 19,22). They saw God with their own eyes, in the Transfigured Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor, becoming the exception to the Lord's word to His disciples: "Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it" (Matt. 13,17).

Indeed, my dear brothers and sisters, Elijah from Thesbis was especially favoured by God. And this was because as the hymnographer says: "When thou wast united unto our God through thy virtue and unspotted life, O Prophet of renown, and hadst for this cause received from Him authority and power, then thou didst change creation as seemed good to thee, and by thy will didst shut the gates of rain on high; and thou didst bring fire down from above, wholly consuming and impious. Do thou entreat Christ the Saviour that our souls be saved" (Matins, praises, Troparion 1).

This authority was also received by Christ's disciples and saints, as Saint Luke the Evangelist says: "See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you" (Luke 10,19).

Interpreting these words of the Lord, Saint Basil the Great

notes that it is impossible for man to exercise this power, if he has not cleared himself and become fortified by the Lord beforehand, the Lord who said to the apostles, behold I have given you the power to tread on snakes and scorpions.

In other words, my dear brothers and sisters, the one who hears and keeps God's commandments is able through the power of the divine Grace to become a communicant of the power of the prophet Elijah, just like the prophet Elisha, who followed him.

Behold why Saint Paul says, "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1,27).

It is noteworthy that the prophet Elijah has a special place in both the Old and the New Testament. And this is so because Elijah is recognized as the second forerunner of the presence of Christ, meaning the last days of the Judgment. Regarding the reappearance of zealot Elijah during the last days, the prophet Malachi says about him: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4,4). Replying to His disciples' question, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things" (Matt. 17,10-11).

According to the interpretation of the distinguished Church Fathers, the Lord here speaks about His Second Coming, of which Elijah is the forerunner. "I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased" (Matt. 17,12). This second Elijah is Saint John the Baptist who came before our Lord Jesus Christ. Saint John the Baptist was very much like Elijah of Thesbis which is why the Scripture calls him "With the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1,17). Interpreting these words, Zigavinos and Origen say: "[The Scripture] named 'spirit' the spiritual gift, while power is the strength. It thus says that he has both the gift and the strength of Elijah".

As for us, who keep fervently the commemoration of the prophet Elijah, let us say along with the hymnographer: "Compassionate Lord, grant Thy people remission of sins and the great mercy, by the intercessions of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary and of the holy glorious prophet Elijah of Thesbis". Amen, Many happy returns."

After the Divine Liturgy, under the shade of the towering pines, a recreational reception was held by those who sustain the Church, Archimandrite Hilarion and those with him, while at lunch the Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth hosted a meal for His Beatitude and His Entourage at the Metropolis.

From Secretariat-General