

TOWARDS EASTER / 3

The burial of Jesus, prelude to the Resurrection

ECCLESIA

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We publish below the exegesis of the Jesuit Father Cornelio a Lapide (1567-1637), taken from his Commentary on the Passion according to the Gospel of Saint Matthew.

But when even was come. Evening was drawing on, but had not yet come, and it was necessary for Him to be buried before the evening, when the Sabbath (on which they had to rest) began.

A certain rich man. For a poor man would not have dared to make such a request, says S. Jerome.

Of Arimathæa. Arimathæa, says S. Jerome, means “lifted up,” as was Joseph here.

Named Joseph. Christ came into the world close to Joseph the betrothed husband of the Virgin, and was buried by another Joseph. Joseph means “increased”—that is, by the grace of God. For as the Patriarch Joseph abounded in chastity and affection for his father, so did Joseph the husband of the Virgin excel in chastity; and this Joseph, again, was eminent for his tender love for Christ, his spiritual father, when now dead. S. Mark calls him a noble Counsellor (*βουλευτής*), in Vulg. *decurio*, which was the provincial word for Senator. He is supposed to have been a Councillor of Jerusalem, from his having lived and made his burial-place there. Maldonatus supposes he took part in the Council about taking and killing Christ, but that he did not agree with the rest (Luke xxiii. 51

Who also himself was Jesus' disciple, and thus wished to perform the last offices for his Master.

He came to Pilate. “Came boldly, says S. Mark, for though, for fear of the Jews, he was a secret disciple, yet he fearlessly entered on this difficult work; for he was both strengthened by Christ and urged on by the Blessed Virgin. “From this we may see, says Victor of Antioch, “his great resolution and boldness, for he nearly sacrificed his own life for Christ’s sake, by drawing down on himself the suspicions of his Jewish enemies;” and S. Chrysostom, “The boldness of Joseph is highly to be admired, when for love of Christ he incurred peril of death, and exposed himself to general hatred.” S. Luke and S. Mark say, “who also himself waited for the Kingdom of God.” He hoped, *i.e.*, through Christ, for heavenly love, and thus risked danger for His sake.

And begged the body of Jesus. S. Anselm says it was revealed to himself by the Blessed Virgin that Joseph gave this reason, among others, for his request, that His mother was dying of grief for her only Son, and that it was unreasonable that the innocent mother should die as well as the Son; but that it would be some consolation to her to bury Him. Grant her, therefore, most afflicted as she is, this favour. It is probable, also, that he alleged the holiness and innocence of Jesus, which Pilate well knew, and that therefore His body ought not to be cast forth with those of criminals into the Valley of Corpses,

adjoining Golgotha, but was worthy of honourable burial, which he was ready to provide.

Then (having heard and approved of Joseph's reasons) Pilate **commanded the body to be delivered**. That he might thus make Him some kind of satisfaction for having condemned Him to death, and also palliate his own conduct by giving Him an honourable burial, as though he had condemned Him by compulsion.

To be delivered. S. Mark adds, "But Pilate marvelled if He were already dead," because the thieves were not yet dead, and also (says Euthymius) because he expected that Jesus would die slowly being a divine man, far surpassing others in endurance. "But when he knew from the Centurion that He was dead, he gave the body to Joseph" (Mark xv. 45).

And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth. Such a cloth well suited this most pure body. Sindon is a cloth woven of the finest and most delicate flax, so called from Sidon, where it was first made. The Jews used to wrap their dead bodies in it, bound their hands and feet with bandages, and the head with a napkin (John xi. 44). Thus did Joseph do to Christ. S. Jerome from this condemns the lavish funerals of the rich, and adds, "But we can take this to signify, in a spiritual sense, that he who receives Jesus in a pure mind wraps him in a clean linen cloth."

For this reason the body of Christ is in the Mass placed only in a very clean and fine linen cloth. This is called a Corporal, from the body of Christ which it contains within it, as though in a tomb. S. John adds that Nicodemus brought myrrh and aloes to anoint and perfume the body (John xix. 39). For these kept bodies from putrefying.

Mystically: Euthymius wishes us to be fragrant with these ointments when we receive the body of Christ in our breast, as in a new tomb. "Let us, too," he says, "when we receive the body of Christ at the altar, anoint it with sweet odours, *i.e.*, by virtuous acts and by contemplation," &c. Baronius describes from Jewish writers their mode of laying out for burial.

And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock. S. John adds (xix. 41) that it was in a garden. It was "a new tomb," lest any one else who had there been buried should be supposed (says S. Chrysostom) or pretended (S. Jerome) to have risen again. S. Augustine says,

Mystically: As no one either before or after Him was conceived in the Virgin's womb, so no one either before or after Him was buried in this tomb.

In the rock. "For had it been built of many stones, and the foundations had fallen in, it

might have been said that the body had been stolen away," says S. Jerome. Bede, on Mark xv., describes fully its shape, "That it was so high that a man could hardly touch the top. Its entrance was on the east. On the north was the place where the Lord lay, raised up above the rest of the floor, and open on the south." Adrichomius also describes it, and adds "that Joseph gave up his own tomb to Christ, who was thus buried in the grave of a stranger." "He who had no home of His own when alive (says Theophylact), has no tomb of His own, but is laid in another's tomb, and being naked is clothed by Joseph." "He is buried," says S. Augustine, "in the tomb of another, because He died for the salvation of others. Why needed He a tomb of His own, who had not any true cause of death in Himself? Why needed He a tomb on earth, whose seat was for ever in Heaven? What had He to do with a tomb, who for the space of three days rather rested in His bed than lay dead in the grave?"

Anagogically: Christ thus signified that He and His were strangers on earth, and that Heaven was their true country. S. Antony, S. Ephrem, S. Francis, and others preferred to be buried in another's grave, and not their own, after Christ's pattern. Here, then, was fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (xi. 10), "And His sepulchre shall be glorious." Hence, too, the custom of pilgrimages to Jerusalem for so many centuries. Hence the erection by S. Helena of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, with its surpassing splendour, enclosing under the same roof the site of the crucifixion, resurrection, &c. Hence the wish of Godfrey of Bouillon, and other kings after him, to be buried on the same spot, and the institution also of an order of knighthood.

Lastly, that tomb was in a garden, because Adam had sinned in a garden. Hence, too, Christ began His Passion in a garden, and completed it by being buried in a garden. And this, too, to atone for the sentence passed on Adam; and, moreover, that He might form and plant a most beautiful garden, flourishing with the blossoms and fruits of all virtues, *i.e.*, His Church. Note here that Christ's body was laid in the tomb, as on the Cross, with its head and face so turned as to look away from the east, and towards the west. So Bede and Adrichomius.

And he rolled (aided by his servants and Nicodemus) **a great stone to the door of the sepulchre.** That no one might take away the body; or, rather, Divine Wisdom so ordered it, lest the Jews after the resurrection should deny the fact, and maintain that the Apostles, who had stolen the body away, had boldly invented the tale. And for the same reason God willed that His body should be buried by those, as Joseph and Nicodemus, who were worthy of credit, and that it should be sealed up and watched by the Jews, that in this way His death and subsequent resurrection might be clearly known to all.