



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Waiting for the Kingdom of God May 8, 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is Risen! Indeed, He is Risen!

Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Mark 15: 43)

We call this Sunday, the Third Sunday of Pascha, the Sunday of the Holy Myrrh-bearing Women. It is, however, more appropriately called the *Sunday of the Holy Myrrh-bearers*. Along with the eight women mentioned in the Gospels who went to the tomb of the Lord to anoint Him on that first Pascha morning were two men as well: Joseph of Arimathea (Arimathea is a city in Judea), and Nicodemus the Pharisee. The actual historical details relating to the lives of these ten disciples of our Lord are lost in antiquity, but it is perhaps the case that no disciple has as many traditions and legends associated with his life as does Joseph of Arimathea.

It is during the reading of the Gospel Lesson on the Great Vespers of Holy Friday that we enact St. Joseph's special role in the story of Pascha. As the priest reads the account from the Gospel on that day, telling how Joseph of Arimathea went to Pontius Pilate to request the body of the Lord and how he took the body down from the cross to lay Him in his own new tomb, the priest stops and goes to the cross in the temple and removes the icon of the body of Jesus from the Cross, wraps it in linen and lays it in the altar until the season of Pascha is over. St. Joseph's action was one of devotion to the Lord and great courage. A member of the Sanhedrin, his action would have stood out and been noticed by everyone in the Jerusalem Temple, from the High Priest down to the lowliest temple worker. His courage was driven by his love of the Savior.

The Gospel lesson this week from Mark summarizes St. Joseph's motivations with a simple phrase. It says succinctly that "*himself waiting for the kingdom of God.*" I find this hugely significant. It was not any other special quality that led St. Joseph of Arimathea to request the Body of Christ from the Cross other than the fact that he was a believer, one who waited for the Kingdom of God and saw that Kingdom manifest in the Person of the Master, Jesus Christ.

It is important to remember two things: First, that the Kingdom of God is not a place or a time or a political entity. The Kingdom of God is where God "reigns," not apart from His subjects on some sort of distant throne, but where God reigns in the hearts of His subjects. The Kingdom of God is where God's will is accepted and followed by His subjects. We pray for this every time we recite the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Will be done on earth ... in and among us ... as it is in heaven!" We pray that we too may, like Joseph of Arimathea, become the kind of people that he was, people who discern the Holy Spirit and submit to the reign of God, to the acceptance of His Divine Will, in our hearts. The second thing that is important to remember, though, is that the reign of God within us is not an abstract reality. It is concrete. St. Joseph of Arimathea did not have some sort of ghostly, nebulous, mystical experience that showed him who Jesus is. He saw who Jesus is in the concrete actions that Jesus did. He saw how Jesus always, always, always reached out to the sick and the suffering; how He went out of His way to bring those who were ostracized or outside of the religious life of their community back in: lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, the dead. He brought them to health, to life, to oneness with the One in Whose community they had been cast out or removed.

These things St. Joseph of Arimathea discerned clearly. He heard the teaching of the Lord, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, who have nothing to rely on but God's mercy." He heard and he saw, not in some sort of wispy abstract way, but in the concrete reality of the Lord's merciful, loving, humble actions and words. And this, Brothers and Sisters, is what each of us must remember. It is not the high and abstract teachings that will bring people to Christ. It is the sincere seeking of the presence of God in our thoughts, words and deeds that people will see. If they see those realities within us: charity, humility, patience, forbearance, kindness, the willingness to forgive, genuine concrete spirituality – if they see us as concrete manifestations of Christ-like love, then, and only then, will they follow Him.

These are the very qualities that St. Joseph of Arimathea saw in the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ. And this is what St. Joseph of Arimathea teaches us. Like him, may each of us seek the reign of God and live with His reign in our hearts, seeking to put aside the old man of Adam, and striving to put on the New Man of Jesus Christ. Let us struggle in every action, in every word, in every deed to be Christ to one another, and particularly to those who are "on the outs." These are the very concrete things that St. Joseph of Arimathea saw in the Lord Jesus and sought to emulate in his own life.

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Fr. Elias

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