

**Christ is risen!**

Today we celebrate the visit of a group of women to the tomb of the crucified Christ. We are told in St Mark's gospel that they belonged to a much larger company which followed him and used to provide for him when he was in Galilee and that they had come up to Jerusalem with him. Many of these women like Mary Magdalene had been healed by Christ or attracted by his teaching during his ministry. Unlike the disciples, apart from John, they had stayed at the foot of the cross and witnessed the agonizing and humiliating crucifixion of the Lord. Some had even observed where Christ had been laid in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, who had petitioned Pilate for the body, and therefore prepared spices and ointments for his body.

We can rightly admire the faithfulness and devotion of these 'Myrrh-Bearing Women' to Christ in death, who dutifully bought spices and set off to anoint the body of the Lord, which had not been prepared ritually but had simply been wrapped in a linen shroud and placed in a tomb in a rock. The disciples had fled at the arrest in the garden since they feared being implicated in Christ's work and suffering a similar fate. However, maybe there are mitigating circumstances, in that women at the time, because of their domestic position were not considered as dangerous or a threat to anybody in authority, particularly the religious establishment unlike Christ's male disciples. But there is also something special about the behaviour of the women here which sets them apart from the male sex. In Luke's gospel in the story of the Lord meeting some disciples on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas, whose wife is at the tomb, says of Christ "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel". This suggests that their hopes had gone, while the women simply continue with the duties that they have towards their Lord not knowing how the stone will be rolled away or how this whole matter will end. In some ways it reminds me of what a larger than life vicar told me as a teenager when I was in love that when you are holding hands romantically with a young lady in the moonlight and being transported, she is already thinking about what colour and style the future living room curtains will be. Such female practicality, which continues in married life to remind their spouses that the living room badly needs painting or that the kitchen floor needs tiling.

We can apply this to our spiritual life directly. Many of us are looking to satisfy all the requirements which our Orthodox faith imposes on us, which basically reflects our pride. But perhaps all that Christ requires of us is simply to survive spiritually and maintain our faith in him throughout the trials which surely come upon us and show us who we really are as people, not shining saints but somewhat ugly sinners who regularly betray the Lord by our deeds and thoughts. St Paul, we are told, wrestles with his 'thorn in the flesh' and asks God to remove it but he is simply told, "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness". Elsewhere he tells us "When we are weak, then we are strong". In our weakness and apparent failings we can often be more useful to the Lord.

So this account of the women visiting the tomb of the Lord in faith and humility, despite not knowing how to deal with the problem of rolling the stone away, has much to say to us about our lives in Christ. There are times when the way ahead cannot be seen and we simply need to live in the moment, as when tragedy strikes in one form or another and knocks us off our feet. Then there are other times when the path seems clearly laid out and all we have to do is to walk in it. Whichever phase we are in, we need to keep our trust in God's providence and intimate concern for our lives and our salvation. Many of you will know the story of the murderous pirate Macaldus, the first bishop of the Isle of Man, who I mentioned a week ago. Having failed spectacularly to kill St Patrick in an ambush he was dramatically converted to Christianity and after catechism and baptism was left by St Patrick on the Irish Sea in a very small boat without oars. He was washed up on the shores of the island and became a much loved bishop. The saint knew much about the mysterious way God works.

Side by side with this simple trust in Christ's will for our lives comes the means of deepening our relationship with God and that above all is the receiving of communion or partaking mystically of his body and blood, which is vital to our spiritual health and the life-long process of inner healing. We cannot always be in a state of grace, whatever that means, when we prepare for communion. We are not meant to have a feeling of being satisfied with ourselves when we come to communion. We are simply told to examine our consciences, to confess our sins if necessary, to fast and to receive the sacrament, asking that, as the prayers appointed beforehand say "that we may not be burned" since we are receiving the living God into ourselves. We are unworthy of him and we shall always fall short but that is no reason for holding back. Our medicine needs to be taken regularly not just when we feel like taking it.

So the message of the visit of the Myrrh-Bearing Women to the tomb of Christ reminds us like them of our weakness and loss of hope in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles set before us. But the women hold their faith and a miracle takes place. In no lesser way is it the same for us. "He is risen. He is not here," they are told. That too is the wonderful message of Pascha for all of us.

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**8<sup>th</sup> May 2022, Oxford**