

Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearers

excerpted from "A Year of the Lord Liturgical Bible Studies"

On the third Sunday of Pascha the Orthodox Church commemorates a number of persons connected with the final events of Jesus' life who were important witnesses to His death and resurrection. These are the myrrh-bearing women who came to anoint the body of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea who buried Jesus, and Nicodemus who helped him. We gratefully remember them during the third week of Easter for their faith, courage, and devotion to the Lord.

Joseph of Arimathea was an influential Jewish leader, a member of the supreme Jewish Council in Jerusalem, who was attracted by Jesus' message about God's kingdom. St. Luke tells us that "he was a good and honorable man" and that "he had not agreed with their [the Council's] decision and action" (Lk. 23:51) regarding Jesus' crucifixion. Yet, like Nicodemus, who was also a member of the Council, Joseph did not make a public witness to Jesus. Both he and Nicodemus were "secret disciples" (Jn. 19:38-39) who, during Christ's ministry, did not dare risk their reputation and standing among the Jewish aristocracy by identifying with Jesus. But the injustice of Jesus' death led them to a moment of decision. They asked Pilate for Jesus' body and dared bury Him whom the Council had condemned, while the known disciples scattered and were hiding in fear!

Joseph was a wealthy man, and he buried Jesus in a tomb which he owned (Mt. 27:60), a new tomb in a garden (Jn. 19:41). He bought a fine linen shroud in which to wrap Jesus. He and Nicodemus spared no expense and gave the Master a royal burial (Jn. 19:39). Who can describe the richness of their feelings, their tears of repentance and love, as they buried their dear Lord with their own hands? A hymnographer has tried to catch the intimacy of this moment with the following moving Vesper hymn which is also chanted near the Epitaphios, the symbolic tomb of Christ, on Holy Friday afternoon during the Service of the Descent from the Cross.

When Joseph with Nicodemus brought You, who have put on light like a robe, down from the Cross, and beheld you dead, naked, and unburied, he mourned with deep compassion and wailed, saying: "Woe is me, sweet Jesus! A while ago, when the sun beheld You suspended on the Cross, it was shrouded in darkness. The earth quaked with fear. The curtain of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. But I see that You willingly endured death for my sake! How then shall I bury You, my God? How shall I wrap You with linen? With what hands shall I touch Your pure body? Or what dirges shall I chant at Your departure, Merciful One! I magnify Your Passion! I praise Your burial together with Your resurrection! I cry out: Lord, glory to You!

Vesper Hymn – Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers

Read Mark 15:42-47, which is the first part of the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers.

- 1. How is Joseph described in vss. 42-43?**
- 2. What adverb describes how Joseph went before Pilate (vs. 43)?**
- 3. What actions did Joseph take in burying Jesus (vs. 46)?**

4. What do you like about Joseph of Arimathea? Why?

5. In what ways are you a “secret” and/or “public” follower of Christ today?

The Women Disciples

In ancient Jewish culture women were restricted to domestic duties. They didn't have full access either to the Temple or the synagogue. At least ten Jews were required to form a synagogue, but women did not count. Women could not be called as witnesses in court. Their religious duties were the same as a slave's on the assumption that women, like slaves, could not control their own time. A pious Jew would not talk to a woman on the street. Even when women had to come out of the house they had to wear veils and, if married, to walk a few steps behind their husbands. As the Jewish historian Josephus put it: “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man.”

When one considers the place of women in the ministry of Christ, the contrast with the usual role of Jewish women of that time could not be more striking. Among the most faithful followers of Jesus were women. In a remarkable passage St. Luke reports that a close circle of women along with the male disciples followed Jesus and supported Him out of their own resource. **Read Luke 8:1-3.**

It is true that Jesus didn't choose any women to be among the twelve disciples, but apart from that He did not treat men and women differently. He addressed everyone with the same love and the same message. He talked freely with the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4) He healed many women, among them the woman with the hemorrhage (Mt. 9:20-22). He allowed the sinful woman to touch Him, much to the surprise of His host (Lk. 7:36-50). He also had a special friendship with Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38-42; Jn. 11:5). While the men disciples fled at the hour of the Cross, the women followers did not desert Jesus. They were present near the Cross and observed where He was buried. In the early morning following the Sabbath they courageously came to mourn Jesus and to anoint Him with spices and aromatic oils, a burial custom of the Jews. Their devotion to the Lord, as is shown in the Gospels, was rewarded by the fact that these women were the first to discover the empty tomb and the first to see the risen Christ.

“The holy women wept with joy as they heard the good news of Christ's resurrection. They came to anoint the Savior, but instead were anointed themselves with everlasting life.”

- Anonymous

Read Mark 16:1-8, which is the second part of the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers.

- 6. What were the names of the myrrh-bearing women (vs. 1)?**

- 7. What concern did they have as they went to the tomb (vss. 3-4)?**

- 8. What was the good news about Jesus (vs. 6b)?**

- 9. The women were at first afraid to say anything, but what is the message they were to take to the men disciples (vs. 7)?**

- 10. How does the example of the myrrh-bearing women speak to you?**

- 11. How can the teachings of Christ bring equality and harmony to men and women today?**

Serving Others

The myrrh-bearing women, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus, shared a willingness to serve Christ. They loved Jesus deeply. In the hour of His death, and despite great risks, they had the courage to serve His last earthly needs. It was Jesus Himself who set this pattern of love and service. He said: "I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11) He taught: "Love one another, just as I love you. The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them" (Jn. 15:12-13). Read the words Jesus spoke to His disciples in Matthew 20:25-28 when they became angry with each other about position and privilege.

Read Acts 6:1-7, the Epistle reading for the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers, which tells about the seven deacons (*diakonoi* or "servants" of the early Church).

- 12. Why did a quarrel arise between the early Jewish Christians (vs. 1b)?**

- 13. What did the early Church do about this under the supervision of the apostles (vs. 3)?**

- 14. How were the seven deacons confirmed in their new role (vs. 6)?**

- 15. How did the apostles serve the Church and the Christian mission (vs. 4)?**