

## Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



All Souls Chapel Window (East, side window)

Holy Monday

## **Reading: John 12:1-11**

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

## **Commentary**

This window, like the East window in this 'All Souls Chapel', was made by the noted jewellery designer John H. Bonnor, who was also famous for his stained glass. It is in memory of James Cook, of 24 Addison Road, who died on the 17 May 1907, and was given by his daughter Margaret.

The window shows two women, early on Easter morning, on their way to the Tomb where Christ has been laid after His Crucifixion.

Barefooted, with veiled heads, they wear stoles embroidered with the sign of the cross. Their heads look downwards with sadness and sorrow

for they come, at the earliest permissible time, to complete the anointing of Jesus's body for burial. One carries a chalice and the other a covered box. The colours are radiant, as if the women are bathed in the early light of dawn.

Decent burial was regarded to be of great importance in Israel and the thought of lying unburied was dreaded nearly above all else. To bury a stranger ranks with giving bread to the hungry and the clothing the naked in the Book of Tobit. Burial usually took place within a day, due to the climate. For instance, funeral preparations for Jairus's daughter begin right away (Mark 5:38), and Lazarus is buried on the day of his death (John 11). Burial would have been first in a temporary grave - usually caves, hewn tombs, sarcophagi or catacombs- and then, sometime later, there would be a second burial of the bones in an ossuary (a chest).

We know from the Gospels that Joseph of Arimathea sought permission to remove Jesus's body from the Cross, then wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in a new tomb, which he had hewn from the rock for himself and his family. It was a place easy to distinguish in other words, and the Gospellers report that 'Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses' saw where the body was laid. St John tells us it was very near in fact to where Jesus was crucified.

The Gospel of John also tells us the disciples brought a great quantity of myrrh and aloes 'and wound (Jesus's body) in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.' (John 19:40). However,

there was a delay in completing the preparation of the body for burial because of the Sabbath (Mark 16:1).

It is highly likely that these women have been preparing perfumes and ointments which they now bring for the washing of the body 'at dawn on the first day of the week.' At the birth of Christ wisemen brought myrrh to the infant Jesus, an embalming ointment, a symbol of Christ's mortality. In the reading today we hear of how a woman anoints Jesus's feet with costly nard, and He says of her 'She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.'

Jesus's dead body would have been bound in strips of cloth. We know this from the burial of Lazarus, who had been in the tomb for four days, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. (John 11:44). Later St John tells us that when Peter and John look into the tomb they saw 'the linen cloths lying and the napkin which had been on his head not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.' (John 20:6,7)

Our window depicts the women who went to the tomb as the first messengers of the Easter Gospel. Behind each woman is a suggestion of feathered wings. St Luke tell us, 'when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive.' (24:23) This is the message that these women are to bear, and they wear stoles, like a priest, the symbol of their duty to spread the Good News, the symbol of eternal life. The



women have become like the angels, messengers, ‘apostles’, sent out with the Easter Gospel on their lips.

## **Meditation**

The Resurrection is first revealed to women. Here we have the ‘two Marys’ who had followed Jesus in His ministry. They had stood faithfully at the Cross, close enough to see Christ hung between the criminals, to hear Him taunted and to watch Him die.

And when Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus’ body (strange the way Jesus’ earthly life was bracketed by men named Joseph and women named Mary) they followed again, watching to know for sure the place of His tomb. They took on the responsibility of caring properly for the body of this man they loved. They prepared the spices that were needed for burial. It was their act of love.

Amid the mess of suffering, pain and death, the women receive the message that death could not hold the one they loved. They experience the power and the beauty of God’s merciful love, they allow that love to conquer their discouragement and hesitancy and give them new life, and then they boldly give to others what they have received.

The glory of Christ’s victory can’t be fully enjoyed unless it is generously shared.

Orthodox Christians call them the “Myrrh-Bearing Women” and they sing of them every single week, for every Sunday is a mini-Easter:

“Very early in the morning,  
the myrrh-bearing women  
were hastening to Your tomb lamenting.  
But the Angel appeared to them and uttered,  
“The time for lamentation has ended;  
weep no more.  
Go announce the Resurrection  
to the Apostles.”

How do we take that message to heart?

## **Prayer**

Almighty God, who revealed the resurrection of your Son to the women as they faithfully came bearing myrrh to his tomb: Grant that we too may perceive the presence of the risen Lord in the midst of pain and fear, that we may go forth proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.