

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Christ is Risen!

Today we commemorate the Myrrh-Bearing women, the Pious Joseph of Arimathea and the Righteous Nicodemus.

Joseph was a wealthy man and member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. He was secretly a follower of Christ. We read in the Gospel of Matthew: "Now when it was evening, there came a certain rich man of Arimathea, Joseph by name, who was himself a disciple of Jesus" (St. Matthew 27:57) and in the Gospel of John and Mark "Now after these things Joseph of Arimathea, because he was a disciple of Jesus (although for fear of the Jews a secret one), besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus" (St. John 19:38; St. Mark 15:43).

Together with Nicodemus, Joseph removed the body of Christ from the cross and placed it in Joseph's new sepulcher. It was important that it be a previously unused one, since those who hated Jesus could say that it was someone else that had come back to life, not Jesus. When the Jews found this out, they shackled Joseph and threw him into prison. But the resurrected Lord appeared to him and convinced him of His resurrection. After this, the Jews released him from prison and banished him from Israel. He then went throughout the world preaching the Holy Gospel of Christ. He ended up in England where he reposed in the Lord.

The holy and righteous Nicodemus was a Pharisee who came to hear the Lord by night. In the Gospel of John, he appears three times. The first is when he visits Jesus in the middle of the night in order to avoid persecution by the Sanhedrin. Remember, these were the Jewish temple leaders, of which he was a member. He wanted to listen to Jesus' teachings (John 3:1-21).

This meeting, is where Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be "born again" in order to enter into the Kingdom of God.

The second appearance in John (7:45-51), where he states the law concerning the arrest of Jesus at the Feast of Booths. He asked the rest of the Sanhedrin "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" They answered and said to him, "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee."

Finally, his last appearance is after the Crucifixion where he assists the Noble Joseph in recovering Jesus' body and preparing it for burial (St. John 19:39-42; St. Mark 15:43). We don't know what happened to Nicodemus after this.

It took great courage for these men to approach Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Joseph and Nicodemus both knew that for going to Pilate they could suffer the same fate that their Lord had suffered. They knew that once word got out about what they had done, the Jewish leaders could possibly turn on them as they had done to Jesus.

Think a little bit about what it meant to place Jesus into the tomb. Although both Nicodemus and Joseph were followers of Jesus they, as also the apostles, did not understand Jesus when he said

that he would rise from the dead in three days. They were just showing their love for their teacher.

I was reading a couple of books by Fr. Anthony Coniaris this week and he was asking: do we put Christ in a tomb ourselves? When we come to church we leave the world behind us and enter into his kingdom.

When we leave the church after the Liturgy do we leave Jesus behind, not taking Him into the world, as if we were placing him in a tomb, not sharing Him with the rest of the world. The church becomes a tomb for Christ when we limit his presence to being only there. We think that God is not present outside of the church. That He is present only in the church. We think that when we leave church on Sunday, we leave the presence of Christ.

Fr. Anthony tells of someone saying:

"The cross having failed, the world turned to a far more subtle way of disposing of Jesus – it worshiped Him. It put Him on a high altar with its ornate and costly symbols, and fenced Him in there. It said to him, 'Stay there. That is where You belong. Stay there, and when Sundays come, we'll come and worship you.'" What they mean, of course, by "worship" is to pay lip service to Him."

The leaders of the Jewish people in Israel sought to destroy Jesus and his followers by crucifying Him. They had hoped that, once Jesus was dead and His disciples saw how He had been tortured to death, they would abandon Him and His movement would die out. They were aware of other men who had declared themselves to be the Messiah. Once they had died their followers quickly fell away and their movement died too.

A question Fr. Anthony was asking is: "Do we make the Church a tomb, the sepulcher, for a dead Christ."

No tomb is powerful enough to keep Christ buried. The Church is not just a brick building. The Church of God is living people. Every baptized Orthodox Christian is a church – a walking church. St. Paul asked, "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?"

Our bodies are a Temple, a Church, in which God first came to abide when we are baptized and comes now to abide when we receive His precious body and blood in Holy Communion. Christ cannot be imprisoned in a building with a cross on top of it. We are the church – wherever we go.

Fr. Anthony tells of a student who once spoke to him about another student – a friend of his – who was very much mixed up and confused. If only, he said, he could get this other student to come to church to talk with a priest, then perhaps some of his problems could be solved.

Fr. Anthony suggested to the student that it was not necessary to bring his confused friend to church. He – the student Himself – was the church. Why didn't he sit down with his friend, show some real interest in him, listen to him, talk with him, and be whatever help he could be to his confused friend.

Christ did not bury Himself in a church. He made each one of us part of the church. We are members of the Body of Christ which is the church. What does this mean but that ours are the hands, the eyes, the mouths, and the ears through which Christ works today to help people.

Don't ever let Christ remain buried in the church. Roll away the stone and let Him into your home, your business, your recreation, your life.

We are called to be God's witnesses to the world. This means that our lives must be led in such a manner that others, when they see how we behave, how we talk, and what we do, know that we are Christians by our love.

This was one of the things in the early centuries of the church that brought so many pagans to become followers of Christ. The Romans and the Jews were convinced that by persecuting the Christians no one would want to become one. Instead, because the Christians showed great love for one another, as well as for strangers (remember the story of the Good Samaritan), they knew there was something special about the followers of Jesus.

It wasn't just God caring for those who are martyred, but to the Christians dying to how they had been raised and how they had been taught by society. It was due to the Christians opening their hearts to those in need that so many converted and become followers of Jesus, even though they knew it might bring death to them.

There are also people who bury Christ in their hearts. They are the people who tell me: "I may not come to church on Sunday, father, but Christ is always in my heart." They don't participate in the liturgy. They don't receive Holy Communion. They don't support the work of Christ through His Church. They seldom pray and yet – they tell me – *Christ is in my heart*. He is there, unfortunately that is where they keep Him – dead and buried.

If there are those today who claim that God is dead, could it be that He is dead because we Christians have buried Him... buried Him in our sins and our indifference? And if we have buried God, is there any wonder that we are such an anxious and worried people today? If God is dead, then we are god. All the burdens – ours as well as the worlds – are placed on our shoulders. And who can bear this?

The road of the Christian is hard. The way of the Christian is not popular. It takes courage to follow Jesus in everyday life. It takes courage to maintain a Christian home. It takes courage to live by Christian standards. What is the source of this courage? How do we get it? Where do we find it?

In writing about the early Christian martyrs an anonymous author wrote:

"Who can choose but to admire their nobility and endurance and love for their Master. I speak of the men who were so tortured with whipping that their bodies were laid open to their veins and arteries, yet they endured it, so that all who saw them pitied and lamented their fate. Not one of them sighed or groaned, *for the Lord stood by them and consoled them.*"

Here, then, was the secret of their remarkable courage: "*the Lord stood by them...*"

The New Testament says that when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, they took note of them that they had been with Jesus. There is something about spending time in the presence of Jesus that strengthens us. It strengthens us not to fear the faces of men. Courage comes from the depth of our soul when we know deep down that God is with us.

We read in Acts 4:13, "now when they saw the boldness of Peter...they marveled." When we look back to verse 4:8 we find the secret of Peter's boldness: "then Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit!" That was the source of Peter's boldness. It is Peter filled with the Holy Spirit! A person who is filled with the Holy Spirit can be none other than bold.

If you remember, I told the story of St. Luke, Bishop of Simferopol and Crimea, the Blessed Surgeon:

St Luke, prior to him being ordained, was called Valentine. He proved himself to be a brilliant surgeon. He wrote numerous articles which brought him acclaim. Yet his Faith came first. Before every surgery, he would pray before the icon of the Theotokos in the operating room and then make the sign of the cross with iodine on the patient's chest.

Because of his selfless work, many came to him for healing and he welcomed all, regardless of their ethnic or social background. Aware that his gift as a surgeon was from God, Valentine often worked without pay, following Christ's command to his apostles: "Freely you have received, freely give"

When Lenin took over the government he began to persecute the Church. Valentine was under constant threat due to his faith. And yet, he found comfort worshipping and serving in the church. In 1920, the authorities ordered that Valentine's icon in the operating room be removed.

Valentine, at the risk of not only his job but his life, refused to operate until it was replaced. Soon, a prominent party member's wife became sick and demanded Valentine as her surgeon. He replied: "I am sorry, but due to my beliefs I cannot enter the operating room unless the icon is put back in its proper place." The authorities eventually gave in and the icon was replaced and Valentine healed the party member's wife.

He did not live his life hiding his love for God. It was well known that he was a Christian, which caused him to be arrested many times and sent to prison. He did not hesitate to show by his actions that he was a Christian.

The Communists, not only in Russia but also in China and throughout the world have arrested, tortured and killed millions of Christians, far more than the Romans ever dreamt of doing. There are thousands being killed today because they are Christians. ISIS and other Moslem terrorists have made it part of their reason for existing. It is a commitment to kill all Christians. These men and women who were tortured, imprisoned and killed did not lose their faith in God. They trusted God. We too must trust God in all things and be His witness to the world.

Today, it seems that the entire world has turned its back on faith in God. We as Orthodox Christians must live our lives as the early Christians did showing total love for all, not just our friends, but for all people. We must be examples to the world as to what it means to be a Christian.

We must be willing to turn our backs on the temptations of the world. The world is trying to drag us away from the true God. We must not keep the love of Christ hidden from the world. We must put our trust in God and know that he will care for us.

Jesus taught us to feed the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison. When people see us doing these things they will know that we are Christians. And perhaps they too might want what we have, the love of God in our hearts.

Keep in mind that the world hates Christians, but Jesus promised us that we will be blessed when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.