

## **The Descent from the Cross**

At the time when everyone had left the neighbourhood of the Cross, and a few guards alone stood around it, I saw five persons, who I think were disciples, and who had come by the valley from Bethania, draw nigh to Calvary, gaze for a few moments upon the Cross, and then steal away. Three times I met in the vicinity two men who were making examinations and anxiously consulting together. These men were Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. The first time was during the Crucifixion (perhaps when they caused the clothes of Jesus to be brought back from the soldiers), and they were then at no great distance from Calvary. The second was when, after standing to look whether the crowd was dispersing, they went to the town to make some preparations. The third was on their return from the tomb to the Cross, when they were looking around in every direction, as if waiting for a favourable moment, and then concerted together as to the manner in which they should take the body of our Lord down from the Cross, after which they returned to the town.



Their next care was to make arrangements for carrying with them the necessary articles for embalming the body, and their servants took some tools with which to detach it from the Cross, as well as two ladders which they found in a barn close to Nicodemus's house. Each of these ladders consisted of a single pole, crossed at regular intervals by pieces of wood, which formed the steps. There were hooks which could be fastened on any part of the pole, and by means of which the ladder could be steadied, or on which, perhaps, anything required for the work could also be hung. The woman from whom they had bought their spices had packed the whole neatly together. Nicodemus had bought a hundred pounds' weight of roots, which quantity is equal to about thirty-seven pounds of our measure, as has been explained to me. They carried these spices in little barrels made of bark, which were hung round their necks, and rested on their breasts. One of these barrels contained some sort of powder. They had also some bundles of herbs in bags made of parchment or leather, and Joseph carried a box of ointment; but I do not know what this box was made of. The servants were to carry vases, leathern bottles, sponges, and tools, on a species of litter, and they likewise took fire with them in a closed lantern.

They left the town before their master, and by a different gate (perhaps that of Bethania), and then turned their steps towards Mount Calvary. As they walked through the town they passed by the house where the Blessed Virgin; St. John, and the holy women had gone to seek different things required for embalming the body of Jesus, and John and the holy women followed the servants at a certain distance. The women were about five in number, and some of them carried large bundles of linen under their mantles.

It was the custom for women, when they went out in the evening, or if intending to perform some work of piety secretly, to wrap their persons carefully in a long sheet at least a yard wide. They began by one arm, and then wound the linen so closely round their body that they could not walk without difficulty. I have seen them wrapped up in this manner, and the sheet not only extended to both arms, but likewise veiled the head. On the present occasion, the appearance of this dress was most striking in my eyes, for it was a real mourning garment. Joseph and Nicodemus were also in mourning attire, and wore black sleeves and wide sashes.

Their cloaks, which they had drawn over their heads, were both wide and long, of a common grey colour, and served to conceal everything that they were carrying. They turned their steps in the direction of the gate leading to Mount Calvary. The streets were deserted and quiet, for terror kept everyone at home. The greatest number were beginning to repent, and but few were keeping the festival. When Joseph and Nicodemus reached the gate they found it closed, and the road, streets, and every corner lined with soldiers. These were the soldiers whom the Pharisees had asked for at about two o'clock, and whom they had kept under arms and on guard, as they still feared a tumult among the people. Joseph showed an order, signed by Pilate, to let them pass freely, and the soldiers were most willing that they should do so, but explained to him that they had endeavoured several times to open the gate, without being able to move it; that apparently the gate had received a shock, and been strained in some part; and that on this account the archers sent to break the legs of the thieves had been obliged to return to the city by another gate. But when Joseph and Nicodemus seized hold of the bolt, the gate opened as if of itself, to the great astonishment of all the bystanders.

It was still dark and the sky cloudy when they reached Mount Calvary, where they found the servants who had been sent on already arrived, and the holy women sitting weeping in front of the Cross. Cassius and several soldiers who

were converted remained at a certain distance, and their demeanour was respectful and reserved. Joseph and Nicodemus described to the Blessed Virgin and John all they had done to save Jesus from an ignominious death, and learned from them how they had succeeded in preventing the bones of our Lord from being broken, and how the prophecy had been fulfilled. They spoke also of the wound which Cassius had made with his lance. No sooner was the centurion Abenadar arrived than they began, with the deepest recollection of spirit, their mournful and sacred labour of taking down from the Cross and embalming the adorable body of our Lord.

The Blessed Virgin and Magdalen were seated at the foot of the Cross; while, on the right-hand side, between the cross of Dismas and that of Jesus, the other women were engaged in preparing the linen, spices, water, sponges, and vases. Cassius also came forward, and related to Abenadar the miraculous cure of his eyes. All were deeply affected, and their hearts overflowing with sorrow and love; but, at the same time, they preserved a solemn silence, and their every movement was full of gravity and reverence. Nothing broke the stillness save an occasional smothered word of lamentation, or a stifled groan, which escaped from one or other of these holy personages, in spite of their earnest eagerness and deep attention to their pious labour. Magdalen gave way unrestrainedly to her sorrow, and neither the presence of so many different persons, nor any other consideration, appeared to distract her from it.

Nicodemus and Joseph placed the ladders behind the Cross, and mounted them, holding in their hands a large sheet, to which three long straps were fastened. They tied the body of Jesus, below the arms and knees, to the tree of the Cross, and secured the arms by pieces of linen placed underneath the hands. Then they drew out the nails, by pushing them from behind with strong pins pressed upon the points. The sacred hands of Jesus were thus not much shaken, and the nails fell easily out of the wounds; for the latter had been made wider by the weight of the body, which, being now supported by the cloths, no longer hung on the nails. The lower part of the body, which since our Lord's death had sunk down on the knees, now rested in a natural position, supported by a sheet fastened above to the arms of the Cross. Whilst Joseph was taking out the nail from the left hand, and then allowing the left arm, supported by its cloth, to fall gently down upon the body, Nicodemus was fastening the right arm of Jesus to that of the Cross, as also the sacred crowned head, which had sunk on the right shoulder. Then he

took out the right nail, and having surrounded the arm with its supporting sheet, let it fall gently on to the body. At the same time, the centurion Abenadar, with great difficulty, drew out the large nail which transfix the feet.

Cassius devoutly received the nails, and laid them at the feet of the Blessed Virgin. Then Joseph and Nicodemus, having placed ladders against the front of the Cross, in a very upright position, and close to the body, untied the upper strap, and fastened it to one of the hooks on the ladder; they did the same with the two other straps, and passing them all on from hook to hook, caused the sacred body to descend gently towards the centurion, who having mounted upon a stool received it in his arms, holding it below the knees; while Joseph and Nicodemus, supporting the upper part of the body, came gently down the ladder, stopping at every step, and taking every imaginable precaution, as would be done by men bearing the body of some beloved friend who had been grievously wounded.

Thus did the bruised body of our Divine Saviour reach the ground. It was a most touching sight. They all took the same precautions, the same care, as if they had feared to cause Jesus some suffering. They seemed to have concentrated on the sacred body all the love and veneration which they had felt for their Saviour during his life. The eyes of each were fixed upon the adorable body, and followed all its movements; and they were continually uplifting their hands towards Heaven, shedding tears, and expressing in every possible way the excess of their grief and anguish. Yet they all remained perfectly calm, and even those who were so busily occupied about the sacred body broke silence but seldom, and, when obliged to make some necessary remark, did so in a low voice.

During the time that the nails were being forcible removed by blows of the hammer, the Blessed Virgin, Magdalen; and all those who had been present at the Crucifixion, felt each blow transfix their hearts. The sound recalled to their minds all the sufferings of Jesus, and they could not control their trembling fear, lest they should again hear his piercing cry of suffering; although, at the same time they grieved at the silence of his blessed lips, which proved, alas too surely, that he was really dead. When the body was taken down it was wrapped in linen from the knees to the waist, and then placed in the arms of the Blessed Virgin, who, overwhelmed with sorrow and love, stretched them forth to receive their precious burden.