

The Church at the Pool of Bethsaida

The Pool of Bethsaida lay in a ravine of the valley that separated Mount Sion from the Temple and the rest of that quarter of the city, and which declined eastward into the Valley of Josaphat. It seemed to have been constructed in such a way as to cut off the view of the Temple on the west, for on one side one could not see all around, as could be done on the others. The way to it was



indeed broad enough, but the walls were partly overturned and the road was full of grass and sedge. Just at that point it ran down into a ravine which became greener in proportion to its depth. From the pool could be seen off to the southwest an angle of the Holy of Holies. The sheep pool lay to the north of the Temple near the cattle market, and was entirely enclosed by a wall. From the house of the Last Supper, which stood on the eastern height of Mount Sion, the way led to the Pool of Bethsaida first to the east around the height of Sion, then wound in a half-circle to the north, then turned to the west, and lastly eastward again down into a curve. The whole of this quarter of Sion as far as the pool and across down into the Valley of Josaphat, presented an appearance of desolation. In the dilapidated buildings were formed dwellings for the poor, on the slopes grew groves of juniper trees, and the hollows were covered with high grass and reeds. The Jews shunned this locality, so the new converts now began to settle in it. The Pool of Bethsaida was oval in form and surrounded by five terraces, like an amphitheater. Five flights of steps led down to the pool from these terraces to the little trough like skiffs in which the sick who were seeking a cure were laid when waiting to be sprinkled by the bubbling waters. There was also in the pool a copper pump, which arose to nearly the height of a man above the surface of the water and was about as large around as a churn. A little wooden bridge with a railing led to it. I saw by the bridge a tube and piston, which were connected with the pump. When the piston was forced down, a valve was opened and a stream of water squirted out of the pump. By changes made in the opening, the stream could be increased or diminished and made to flow in different directions. The top of the pump could be closed also, and from side jets the streams could be made to spurt all around, like water from a watering pot. I often saw the sick in the skiffs

rowing up to the pump to receive the streams over them. The entrance to the Pool was usually closed. It was opened for the sick only. This pump was out of use, and on the feast of Pentecost was not yet repaired, but a few days later I saw it restored. The terrace walls contained little vaulted halls in which were stone benches hollowed out in the form of a trough. They were for the accommodation of the sick. They could from all sides look down upon the pool, to see whether the waters were being stirred or not. The lowest terrace, the one nearest the pool, was provided with little parapets, or bars. The bottom of the pool was covered with shining white sand, through which three springs bubbled up and sometimes jetted above the surface of the water. The blood of the animals offered in sacrifice flowed through pipes under the altar in the Temple down into the Pool. With its surroundings and the old buildings in its vicinity, the pool covered a very large area. Before reaching it, one had to pass a wall through which there were only three openings. To the east of the pool, the valley made a steep descent, but westward, back of the pool, it was less deep and was spanned by a little bridge. The north side too was steep and overgrown, and on the northeast was a road conducting to the Temple. But it was now gone to ruin and altogether impracticable. Little footpaths, however, led into the city, so that one did not have to go by the public gates. Jesus had often made use of these paths.

The whole pool had hitherto been out of use, for it as well as its surroundings had been allowed to fall to decay. Like many old sanctuaries of our own day, it was quite neglected. Only some poor people with lively faith still held it in veneration and visited it. After the healing of the paralytic by Jesus, the pool was again more frequented, though all the more hateful to the Pharisees. The outer walls were in some places quite in ruins, and many parts of the terraces were in a dilapidated condition. But now all was repaired. The fallen walls were partly replaced by movable screens, and from the pool to the synagogue was raised a covered tent-way.

The old synagogue, which was now erected into a church, was less hemmed in by buildings than the house of the Last Supper, whose court on one side adjoined a row of houses. I saw the Apostles and disciples, after the Feast of Pentecost, working continually at the interior arrangements of the Church. Peter, John, Andrew, and James the Less took turns in preaching at three different places around the pool and on the third terrace, upon which was Peter's chair of instruction. A great many of the Faithful were always in attendance, and I often saw them prostrate on the ground in ardent prayer. Words cannot say what activity reigned throughout the whole Community at all times. Weaving, plaiting, and every kind of work for the new church and

for the poor were carried on.

The church was a large, long, quadrangular edifice with real windows high up in the walls. By means of steps in the wall, one could mount up on the outside to the flat roof, which was surrounded by a gallery. On it were three little cupolas that could be opened like draught holes. The inside, on the two lengths and one of the ends, was furnished with stone benches for the congregation, and the building was in all respects turned into a church. At one end was the altar, at such a distance from the wall that sufficient space was left behind for a sacristy, which was formed by wickerwork screens that reached from the altar to the side walls. These screens were covered in front with fine white stuff, on the other side with coarser. The altar was portable. It consisted of a long, four-cornered piece of wood covered, and resting on three steps. On either side, however, there was only a single step, which could be opened to allow carpets to be laid in, and the back of the altar likewise opened to receive the vestments. On it was a bell-shaped tabernacle with a fine white cover closed in front by two little metallic shields. There was a knob on top, by which it could be lifted. On either side of the tabernacle were branched lamps with burning wicks. The whole altar was enclosed by a white curtain with colored stripes, which was supported by a canopy. It hung down only a little below the top of the altar. The canopy itself formed a niche and depended by five straps from the hand of a figure embroidered by the holy women. It represented an old man in the robes of a High Priest, a triangular halo around the head. It stood in a bowed posture, as if looking down through an opening in the cover, one hand outstretched as if giving a blessing, the other grasping the five straps of the canopy. The curtain was in one piece at the back, but in front it could be drawn to either side or closed with metal clasps.

From the raised altar down to the pulpit was a space set aside apart for the choir ceremonies of the Apostles and disciples. After the holy Resurrection I saw them assembled every day in the Last Supper room for prayer in choir. The Apostles stood along either side of the hall facing the Holy of Holies, while the disciples occupied the vestibule thrown open for the occasion. They sang and prayed, choir and choir. I saw Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Obed present also. The Blessed Virgin usually stood under the middle entrance of the vestibule, her face turned toward the Holy of Holies. She wore the long white mantle and was veiled. Jesus had Himself arranged the choral service, and about the time of the eating of the fish at Tiberias, or perhaps during the meal itself, explained to the Apostles the mysterious signification of this religious ceremony. He had repeated the same on the occasion of Thomas' touching His sacred wounds and giving testimony of his

faith. Once also I saw that Jesus appeared to them while they were chanting in choir before daybreak. They daily assembled twice, in the evening till after dark, and before dawn in the morning. Below the pulpit the congregation was cut off from the choir by a grating, through many places of which the Blessed Sacrament could be reached to them. It was almost like the grating seen in cloisters. On either side of the pulpit there were small doors by which the Apostles and disciples could enter the choir. The congregation was arranged in a certain order, the women separate from the men.

I saw the Apostles and disciples going in procession with the Blessed Sacrament from the house of the Last Supper to the new church. Before setting out, Peter, standing in the entrance to the courtyard and surrounded by about twenty of the disciples, delivered a public discourse before many people. He spoke in fiery words. Many Jews ran to hear, and tried to interrupt him by advancing objections, but their efforts were fruitless. The discourse over, the procession wound down to the new church near the Pool, Peter bearing in his hands the chalice containing the Blessed Sacrament. The chalice was covered with a white linen, something like a bag, which was suspended from his neck. The Blessed Virgin walked after the Apostles with the other women and the disciples. A part of the way was hung with screens of matting, and in the vicinity of the church, the road was even covered in with awnings. The Blessed Sacrament was placed in the new tabernacle on the altar. The tray full of blessed bread had also been brought.

The floor of the church, like that of the house of the Last Supper in these latter days, was covered with colored carpets. The Faithful entered barefoot. The Blessed Sacrament was deposited in a vessel whose cover could be turned to one side. It lay in morsels on a plate that covered the bottom of the vessel and which could be raised by means of a handle, the more conveniently to get at them.