

5. April 2025

MEDITATIONS FOR LENT
“The burial and the descent to hell”

Jn 19:31-42

Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth—that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, “Not a bone of him shall be broken.” And again another scripture says, “They shall look on him whom they have pierced.” After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds’ weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

When all had been accomplished, as the Gospel testifies, Jesus' legs were not broken, but His side was pierced with a lance, from which flowed blood and water.

The preface of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus exclaims: *“From His wounded side flowed blood and water, the fountain of sacramental life in the Church. To His open heart the Saviour invites all to draw water in joy from the springs of salvation.”*

The prophecy is fulfilled: *“They shall look on him whom they have pierced.”* Wherever men find true faith, they receive in the cross salvation, consolation and peace. The love of Jesus is the hope for this lost world; a hope that will last until the end of time.

Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus in secret, and Nicodemus, whom we already met in the Gospel of John and whose heart was open to the Lord, came to honour Him with a burial according to Jewish traditions. These two men could represent those of the Jewish people who will still find the fullness of their faith. Even today there are among the Jews 'hidden disciples' who, out of fear of others, do not openly profess faith in the Messiah. There are also those whose hearts are open to Jesus, but who do not yet fully recognise Him as the Messiah.

The tomb keeps silent, but the Church narrates what happens after Jesus' death: He descends into hell to bring the message of life also to the souls who are waiting there.

The Catechism of Trent states about this article of faith:

“Christ the Lord descended into hell, in order that having despoiled the demons, He might liberate from prison those holy Fathers and the other just souls, and might bring them into heaven with Himself. This He accomplished in an admirable and most glorious manner; for His august presence at once shed a celestial lustre upon the captives and filled them with inconceivable joy and delight. He also imparted to them that supreme happiness which consists in the vision of God, thus verifying His promise to the thief on the cross: This day thou shalt be with me in paradise. This deliverance of the just was long before predicted by Osee in these words: O death, I will be thy death; O hell, I will be thy bite; ' and also by the Prophet Zachary: Thou also by the blood of thy testament hast sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit, wherein is no water; and lastly, the same is expressed by the Apostle in these words: Despoiling the principalities and powers, he hath exposed them confidently in open show, triumphing over them in himself.”

Let us sum it up briefly: According to the general interpretation of theologians, the purpose of the descent into hell was to deliver the souls of the righteous from Hades by granting them the fruits of Redemption, that is, the beatific vision of God.

Holy Saturday, the day on which we commemorate this event, is the day of mourning on which we mourn together with all those who love the Lord; the only day on which the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is not celebrated, but it is also the day on which we can ask the Lord to descend into our depths, into those regions of our soul that are not yet sufficiently illuminated by His light, just as the crucified Lord brought the joy of

Redemption to those who awaited Him. While we, like the Lord's disciples, are still in a daze trying to understand more deeply what happened on Golgotha, while the joy of the Resurrection begins timidly to fill our souls, joy and praise burst forth among those liberated by the Lord.

Soon we will join in their jubilation. But first we must accompany the Lord on the Way of the Cross, offering Him for the Church and asking Him:

“Lord, graciously grant us salvation and peace, that your Church, having overcome all obstacles and errors, may serve you in full freedom, through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit and is God for ever and ever. Amen.”