

SYNAXARIA OF THE TRIODION

by Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos

GREAT WEDNESDAY

On Holy and Great Wednesday, the Divine Fathers decreed that we should commemorate the harlot who anointed the Lord with myrrh, because this took place shortly before His saving Passion.

Verses

The woman who applied myrrh to the body of Christ
Anticipated the myrrh and aloes of Nicodemus.

Synaxarion

As the Lord was going up to Jerusalem, He came to the house of Simon the leper, where a woman who was a harlot approached Him and poured precious myrrh upon His head. This episode is placed here, in order that, according to the word of the Savior, her act of fervent devotion might be proclaimed everywhere. What moved her to come to Simon's house? Because she saw His compassion and the fact that He kept company with all people, and especially now, when she noticed that He had entered the house of a leper, with whom, being unclean, it was forbidden by the Law to associate.

The woman reckoned that, just as He had put up with Simon's leprosy, so also He would tolerate the disease of her soul. Thus, as Christ was reclining at supper, she poured on His head myrrh that was worth three hundred *denarii*. The Disciples, and Judas in particular, rebuked her for this. But Christ came to her defense, lest they thwart her good intention. He then alluded to His entombment, deterring Judas from betraying Him and deeming the woman worthy of honor, saying that her good deed would be proclaimed throughout the world.

It should be known that some are of the opinion that one and the same woman is mentioned by all of the Evangelists; but such is not the case. As the Divine Chrysostomos says, the same woman is cited by three of the Evangelists, and she is thus called a harlot. It is not she who is mentioned by Saint John, but another woman, admirable and of chaste life, Mary the sister of Lazarus, whom Christ would not have loved had she been a harlot.

Of these women, Mary performed the act of pouring out myrrh six days before the Passover, at her house in Bethany, while the Lord was re-

clining at supper. She poured out the myrrh on His beautiful feet and wiped them with her hair, showing Him exceeding honor and offering the myrrh as to God. For she knew very well that at sacrifices olive oil was offered to God, that priests were anointed with myrrh, and that Jacob of old had anointed a pillar with oil and dedicated it to God. Thus, she offered the myrrh to Christ, honoring her teacher as God in return for the resuscitation of her brother. For this reason, she is not promised any reward. On that occasion, Judas alone, being a lover of money, murmured against her.

The other woman, that is, the harlot, two days before the Passover, when Christ was still in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, likewise reclining at supper, poured very costly myrrh upon His head, as Saints Matthew and Mark recount. The Disciples were indignant at this harlot, being fully aware how earnest Christ was with regard to almsgiving. This woman was given the recompense of having her good deed proclaimed throughout the world. Some commentators, therefore, say that one woman was mentioned by the four Evangelists, whereas St. John the Golden-tongued says that there were two women.

There are others who maintain that there were three women. Two of them were the aforementioned—that is, the harlot and Mary, the sister of Lazarus—when the Lord’s Passion was drawing near. The third was another, who performed such a deed prior to these—or rather, being the first of them—around the middle of the Gospel narrative; she was a harlot and a sinner. She poured out myrrh only on Christ’s feet and in the house not of Simon the leper, but of Simon the Pharisee. On that occasion, only the Pharisee was scandalized. Upon her the Savior bestowed the recompense of the remission of her sins. Only the Divine Luke tells about her, around the middle of his Gospel, as we have said. In fact, after the account of this harlot, he immediately adds the following: “And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God” (St. Luke 8:1). From this it is evident that the event in question did not occur during the time of the Passion.

It seems, therefore, from the time, from those who entertained the Lord, from the location, from the persons involved, and from the houses, and also from the manner in which the myrrh was poured out, that there were three women, two of them harlots, and third Mary the sister of Lazarus, who was conspicuous for her virtuous life. As well, it seems that one house was that of Simon the Pharisee, the other that of Simon the leper, situated in Bethany, the third being that of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, in the same city of Bethany.

Hence, it may be inferred from these considerations that two suppers were given for Christ, both of them in Bethany. One took place six days before the Passover, in the house of Lazarus, when Lazarus also ate with Christ, as the Son of Thunder relates: “[S]ix days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead. There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Laza-

rus was one of them that sat at the table with him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair” (St. John 12:1-3). The other supper was held for Christ two days before the Passover, when He was still in Bethany, at the house of Simon the leper, at which time the harlot went up to Him and poured out the precious myrrh. This is confirmed by Saint Matthew’s narrative, in which Christ says to His Disciples: “Ye know that after two days is the feast of the Passover” (St. Matthew 26:2). A little further on, the same Evangelist adds: “Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, there came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at table” (St. Matthew 26:6-7). Saint Mark concurs with this account, for he says: “After two days was the feast of the Passover, and of unleavened bread... And being in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, there came a woman having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard very precious; and she brake the box, and poured it on his head” (St. Mark 14:1, 3).

From this it is clear that they are incorrect who maintain and assert that one and the same woman is mentioned by the four Evangelists as having anointed the Lord with myrrh; who suppose that Simon the Pharisee and Simon the leper are one and the same person—some of them interpreting Simon the leper as being the father of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha; and who opine that one and the same supper took place in one and the same house, in Bethany, and that Simon prepared and furnished the upper room in which the Mystical Supper was held. For these two suppers were given for Christ in Bethany, outside Jerusalem, six days and two days, respectively, before the Jewish Passover, as we have said, when the women offered myrrh to Christ in different ways. The Mystical Supper and the furnished upper room were prepared within the city of Jerusalem one day before the Jewish Passover and the Passion of Christ. Some say that this Supper was held in the house of an unknown man, others that it took place in the house of Christ’s Disciple and bosom friend John, in holy Sion, where the Disciples were hiding for fear of the Jews and where the touching by Saint Thomas occurred after the Resurrection, as did the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, along with other ineffable and mystical events.

For this reason, it seems to me that the account given by Saint John Chrysostomos is truer and more precise, that is, that there were two women about whom the Evangelists wrote. One, as we have said, was the woman mentioned by three of the Evangelists, who was a harlot and a sinner and who poured myrrh on Christ’s head. The other was the woman mentioned by Saint John, Mary the sister of Lazarus, who applied myrrh solely to Christ’s Divine feet by pouring it on them. There were two suppers in Bethany, the Mystical Supper being separate from these. This is evident from the fact that, after the narrative of the harlot, the Savior sends His Disciples into the city to make ready the Passover, as Saint Matthew says: “Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at

hand; I will keep the Passover at thy house with my disciples” (St. Matthew 26:18). Again, St. Mark says: “And...there shall meet you a man bearing a pitcher of water: follow him... And he will shew you a large upper room furnished and prepared: there make ready for us” (St. Mark 14:13, 15). The Disciples went, and found it to be just as Jesus had told them, and they prepared the Passover, that is, the Jewish Passover, which was at the doors and which Christ came and celebrated with the Disciples, as the Divine Chrysostomos says. Then, after the Mystical Supper had taken place, the Divine Washing of the feet having been performed in the meantime, Christ reclined once again and instituted our Passover on the same table, as Saint John the Golden-tongued explains.

The Divine John, and also Saint Mark, the Holy Evangelists, add in their accounts the type of the myrrh, calling it “spikenard, very costly.” It is customary to call spikenard that which is unadulterated and trustworthy in purity. Perhaps this was also an appellation of the best and prime kind of myrrh. Saint Mark adds that the woman broke the alabaster flask in her eagerness, since its neck was narrow. This is a glass vessel, as St. Epiphanius says, made without any handle, which is called a *bikion*. *Myron* was compounded of many other kinds of fragrances, and from the following in particular: myrrh, cassia, iris, calamus, and oil.

Yea, O Christ God, free us from the flood of passions and have mercy on us, for Thou alone art holy and lovest mankind. Amen.

