

SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS

SERMON III ON THE DORMITION

[201] LOVERS are wont to speak of what they love, and to let their fancy run on it by day and night. Let no one therefore blame me, if I add a third tribute to the Mother of God, on her triumphant departure. I am not profiting her, but myself and you who are here present, putting before you a spiritual seasoning and refreshment in keeping with this holy night. We are suffering, as you see, from scarcity of eatables. Therefore I am extemporising a repast, which, if not very costly nor worthy of the occasion, will certainly be sufficient to still hunger. She does not need our praise. It is we who need her glory. How indeed can glory be glorified, or the source of light be enlightened? We are weaving a crown for ourselves in the doing. "I live," the Lord says, "and I will glorify those who glorify Me." [202] Wine is truly pleasant to drink, and bread to eat. The one rejoices, the other strengthens the heart of man. But what is sweeter than the Mother of my God? She has taken my mind captive, and held my tongue in bondage. I think of her by day and night. She, the Mother of the Word, supplies my words. The fruit of sterility makes sterile minds fruitful. We keep to-day the feast of her blessed and divine transit from this world. Let us then climb up the mystical mountain, where beyond the reach of worldly things, passing through the obscurity of storm, we stand in the divine light and may give praise to Almighty power. How does He, who dwells in the splendour of His glory, descend into the Virgin's womb without leaving the bosom of the Father? How is He conceived in the flesh, and does He spontaneously suffer, and suffer unto death, in that material body, gaining immortality through corruptibility? (fqora kthsamenoV to afqarton). And, again, ascending to the Father, He drew His Mother, according to the flesh, to His own Father, assuming into the heavenly country her who was heaven on earth.

To-day the living ladder, through whom the [203] Most High descended and was seen on earth, and conversed with men, was assumed into heaven by death. To-day the heavenly table, she, who contained the bread of life, the fire of the Godhead, without knowing man, was assumed from earth to heaven, and the gates of heaven opened wide to receive the gate of God from the East. To-day the living city of God is transferred from the earthly to the heavenly Jerusalem, and she, who, conceived her first-born and only Son, the first-born of all creation, the only begotten of the Father, rests in the Church of the first-born: the true and living Ark of the Lord is taken to the peace of her Son. The gates of heaven are opened to receive the receptacle of God, who, bringing forth the tree of life, destroyed Eve's disobedience and Adam's penalty of death. And Christ, the cause of all life, receives the chosen mirror, the mountain from which the stone without hands filled the whole earth. She, who brought about the Word's divine Incarnation, rests in her glorious tomb as in a bridal-chamber, whence

she goes to the heavenly bridals, to share in the kingdom of her Son and God, leaving her tomb as a place of rest [204] for those on earth. Is her tomb indeed a resting-place? Yes, more famous than any other, not shining with gold, or silver, or precious stones, nor covered with silken, golden, or purple adornments, but with the divine radiance of the Holy Spirit. The angelic state is not for lovers of this world, but the wondrous life of the blessed is for the servants of the Spirit, and passing to God is better and sweeter than any other life. This tomb is fairer than Eden. And that I may not speak of the enemy's deceit, in the one; of his, so to say, clever counsel, his envy and covetousness, of Eve's weakness and pliability, the bait, sure and tempting, which cheated her and her husband, their disobedience, exile, and death, not to speak of these things so as not to turn our feast into sorrow, this grave gave up the mortal body it contained to the heavenly country. Eve became the mother of the human family, and is not man made after the divine image, convicted by her condemnation; "earth thou art, and unto earth thou shalt return." This tomb is more precious than the tabernacle of old, receiving the real and life-giving receptacle of the Lord, the heavenly table, not [205] the loaves of proposition, but of heaven, not material fire, but her who contained the pure fire of the Godhead. This tomb is holier than the ark of Moses, blessed not with types and shadows, but the truth itself. It showed forth the pure and golden urn, containing the heavenly manna, the living tablet, receiving the Incarnate Word of God from the impress of the Holy Spirit, the golden censer of the supersubstantial word. It showed forth her who conceived the divine fire embalming all creation.

Let demons take to flight, and the thrice miserable Nestorians perish as the Egyptians of old, and their ruler Pharaoh, the younger, a cruel devastator. They were swallowed up in the abyss of blasphemy. Let us who are saved with dry feet, crossing the bitter waters of impiety, raise our voices to the Mother of God at her departure. Let Mary, personifying the Church, lead the joyful strain. Let the maidens of the spiritual Jerusalem go out in singing choirs. Let kings and judges, with rulers, youths, and virgins, young and old, proclaim the Mother of God, and all peoples and nations in their different ways and tongues, sing a new canticle. Let the air resound with praise and [206] instrument, and the sun gladden this day of salvation. Rejoice, O heavens, and may the clouds rain justice. Be glad, O divine apostles, the chosen ones of God's flock, who seem to reach the highest visions, as lofty mountain tops. And you God's sheep, and His holy people, the flock of the Church, who look to the high mountains of perfection, be sad, for the fountain of life, God's Mother, is dead. It was necessary that what was made of earth should return to earth, and thus be assumed to heaven. It was fitting that the earthly tenement should be cast off, as gold is purified, so that the flesh in death might become pure and immortal, and rise in shining immortality from the tomb.

To-day she begins her second life through Him who was the cause of her first being.

She gave a beginning, I mean, the life of the body, to Him who had no beginning in time, although the Father was the cause of His divine existence. Rejoice holy and divine Mount Sion, in which reposes the living divine mountain, the new Bethel, with its grace, human nature united with the Godhead. From thee her Son ascended to heaven as [207] from the olives. Let the world-embracing cloud be prepared and the winds gather the apostles to Mount Sion from the ends of the earth. Who are these who soar up as clouds and eagles to the cause of all resurrection, ministering to the Mother of God? Who is she who rises resplendent, all pure, and bright as the sun? Let the spiritual lyres sing to her, the apostolic tongues. Let grave theologians raise their voices in praise, Hierotheus, the vessel of election, in whom the Holy Spirit abides, knowing and teaching divine things by the divine indwelling. Let him be wrapt out of the body and join willingly in the joyful hymn. Let all nations clap their hands and praise the Mother of God. Let angels minister to her body. Follow your Queen, O daughters of Jerusalem, and, together with her virgins in the spirit, approach your Bridegroom in order to sit at His right hand. Make haste, Lord, to give Thy Mother the welcome which is her due. Stretch out Thy divine hands. Receive Thy Mother's soul into the Father's hands unto which Thou didst commend Thy spirit on the Cross. Speak sweet words to her: [208] "Come, my beloved, whose purity is more dazzling than the sun, thou gavest me of thy own, receive now what is mine. Come, my Mother, to thy Son, reign with Him who was poor with thee." Depart, O Queen, depart, not as Moses did who went up to die. Die rather that thou mayest ascend. Give up thy soul into the hands of thy Son. Return earth to the earth, it will be no obstacle. Lift up your eyes, O people of God. See in Sion the Ark of the Lord God of powers, and the apostles standing by it, burying the life-giving body which received our Lord. Invisible angels are all around in lowly reverence doing homage to the Mother of their Lord. The Lord Himself is there, who is present everywhere, and filling all things, the universal Being, not in place. He is the Author and Creator of all things. Behold the Virgin, the daughter of Adam and Mother of God; through Adam she gives her body to the earth, her soul to her Son above in the heavenly courts. Let the holy city be sanctified, and rejoice in eternal praise. Let angels precede the divine tabernacle on its passage, and prepare the tomb. Let the [209] radiance of the spirit adorn it. Let sweet ointment be made ready and poured over the pure and undefiled body. Let a clear stream of grace flow from grace in its source. Let the earth be sanctified by contact with that body. Let the air rejoice at the Assumption. Let gentle breezes waft grace. Let all nature keep the feast of the Mother of God's Assumption. May youthful bands applaud and eloquent tongues acclaim her, and wise hearts ponder on the wonder, priests hoary with age gather strength at the sight. Let all creation emulate heaven, even so the true measure of rejoicing would not be reached.

Come, let us depart with her. Come, let us descend to that tomb with all our heart's desire. Let us draw round that most sacred bed and sing the sweet words, "Hail, full of

grace, the Lord is with thee. Hail, predestined Mother of God. Hail, thou chosen one in the design of God from all eternity, most sacred hope of earth, resting-place of divine fire, holiest delight of the Spirit, fountain of living water, paradise of the tree of life, divine vine-branch, bringing forth soul-sustaining nectar and ambrosia. Full river of spiritual graces, fertile land of the [210] divine pastures, rose of purity, with the sweet fragrance of grace, lily of the royal robe, pure Mother of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, token of our redemption, handmaid and Mother, surpassing angelic powers." Come, let us stand round that pure tomb and draw grace to our hearts. Let us raise the ever-virginal body with spiritual arms, and go with her into the grave to die with her. Let us renounce our passions, and live with her in purity, listening to the divine canticles of angels in the heavenly courts. Let us go in adoring, and learn the wondrous mystery by which she is assumed to heaven, to be with her Son, higher than all the angelic choirs. No one stands between Son and Mother. This, O Mother of God, is my third sermon on thy departure, in lowly reverence to the Holy Trinity to whom thou didst minister, the goodness of the Father, the power of the Spirit, receiving the Uncreated Word, the Almighty Wisdom and Power of God. Accept, then, my good-will, which is greater than my capacity, and give us salvation. Heal our passions, cure our diseases, help us out of our difficulties, make our lives peaceful, send [211] us the illumination of the Spirit. In flame us with the desire of thy son. Render us pleasing to Him, so that we may enjoy happiness with Him, seeing thee resplendent with thy Son's glory, rejoicing for ever, keeping feast in the Church with those who worthily celebrate Him who worked our salvation through thee, Christ the Son of God, and our God. To Him be glory and majesty, with the uncreated Father and the all-holy and life-giving Spirit, now and for ever, through the endless ages of eternity. Amen.