

1] In the book of Exodus (Ex.20:10ff) Moses is given instructions on how to build the Ark of the Covenant. The wooden chest, also called the Ark of the Testimony, was to hold the stone tablets bearing the commandments, the pot of the Manna that had fed the children of Israel in the wilderness, and Aaron's rod that budded. God tells Moses, 'According to all that I shall show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furnishings, so you shall make them.' (Ex.25:9)

2] The Ark of the Old Testament is a type, a prefiguring icon of what is to be fulfilled in the New. The Ark itself foreshadowed the womb of the Blessed Theotokos herself; the Manna: the precious and all holy body of Christ; the rod: His life-giving Cross; while the tablets of the Law point to Christ the Lawgiver and the fulfiller of the Law.

3] On top of the Ark was the Mercy Seat of pure gold over which were images of two cherubim, spreading their wings to overshadow the Mercy Seat. 'There I will make myself known to you,' God says to Moses. 'And I will speak to you from above the Mercy Seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the Ark of Testimony.' (Ex.25:22)

4] The holy Myrrhbearing women have a vision of those same angelic beings, as we read in the gospel today. In St Luke there are two in shining garments; in St Matthew, one in clothing white as snow. The vision, the mystical appearance, is of course, the fulfilment of what was prefigured over the Mercy Seat. The same angels that watched over the Ark in the temple were those who had guarded His life-giving body in the tomb, but now announced that he had risen from the grave.

5] Everything has now been consummated, the economy of salvation is complete; the mystery of His dispensation is fulfilled and grace has come. All that remains is to announce the glad tidings. 'Come from the vision O ye women disciples, bearers of good tidings,' Sing the Aposticha verses at Paschal vespers. 'And say to

Zion: receive from us the glad tidings of joy of the resurrection of Christ.'

6] With a certain courage, Mark tells us, it had been Joseph of Arimathea who had asked for the body of Jesus from the governor in order to bury it decently and in accordance with Jewish burial customs. A certain courage, it says, for those executed by crucifixion were not necessarily afforded such respect. And, incidentally, it draws attention to the fact that the tomb of Christ was known; that his dead body was laid there: and from there the new Mercy Seat would be created, from where God will make Himself known to us, not in His essence, of course, but in His divine energies, in His power and glory; not from the Mercy Seat that was above the Ark of the Old Covenant, but from the empty tomb, marking the defeat of Death itself.

7] Whilst the male disciples cower and hide for fear of reprisals from the Authorities and the council of the Sanhedrin, the women too take courage, daring to complete the ancient burial customs, disregarding their fears of how others may now regard them: devotees of one, executed as a common rebel, who had claimed to have been the King of Israel. But disregarding any scorn or reprisals, even of being attacked for once being His followers, they come in simple obedience to complete the burial rites.

8] In Paradise, Eve had drawn Adam into her own disobedience and giving rise to the distortion of the relationship between male and female: as Genesis says of Eve, 'Your recourse will be to your husband, and he shall rule over you.' (Gen.3:16) But now all that is undone in Christ. It began with the freely obedient will of the Theotokos, who in saying, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word,' (Lk.1:38) truly became the mother of all Christian people: likewise the Holy Myrrhbearers have contradicted and undone the disobedience of Eve, so that in Christ the relationship and communion between male and female is reestablished in accordance with the intention of our Creator. As St Paul tells the church at Galatia, 'For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are

all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Gal.3:27-28) For that reason we reject those who in the current generation would compel people to believe that there are a multitude of different genders, as they call them, and make them interchangeable at will. They only bear witness to their own folly, revealing in higher profile the old, dysfunctional relationship between Adam and his helpmeet that was rooted in Sin.

9] But we who adhere to the risen Christ, we who, as Paul tells the Corinthians, regard no one according to the flesh [cf. 2 Cor.5:16] are called to a spiritual manner of living; where Christian men are called to shun the abuse and denigration of women, regarding them instead, within the bounds of chastity and respect, as equal partners in the Lord, and not according to the flesh.

10] Anyone who lives in Sin: who regards the world according to the flesh; who is living without repentance, is still living in death. For as the scripture says, ‘Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam.’ (Rom.5:14) And the Law of Moses began to teach and lead the chosen people in the ways of God, even if it were limited to life in this world and could not bring humanity to perfection in eternal life. This tendency to sin in all men is, of course, acknowledged by all human societies: in the concept of Justice and the need for laws to regulate wayward human behaviour, in order to make civilised life possible at all.

11] But even here, in the time of their deepest sorrow and distress, the righteous women disciples of the Lord are brought up short; even they can be mistaken. As the angel tells them, their devout ministrations are no longer necessary in this case. There was no need to buy the spices; perhaps even the myrrh that Mary had been given by the Magi at Bethlehem, would not be used. Joseph of Arimathea, as the hymn says, laid Christ’s body to rest wrapt in linen and spice of myrrh, but those funereal rites would not be completed early on that Sunday morning. For as the angel tells the women, ‘He is risen; He is not here; see the place where they laid Him.’ Through His angel, God had spoken once again at the Mercy Seat. ‘Christ is risen and there is none dead in the tomb,’ St John Chrysostom tells us in his Paschal Homily.

12] Yet the women are bewildered by fear and astonishment. How like grief our first reactions are to joyous news! Just as we might react with disbelief hearing at first of someone's death, so it is when the defeat of Death itself is announced. And so it is with the apostles who, as St Mark continues in his gospel, 'Mary Magdalene...went and told those who had been with Him as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.' (Mk.16:9-11)

13] Thus it happened that that which was from the beginning, which they had heard, which they had seen with their eyes, which they had looked upon and touched with their hands, must be proclaimed as the Word of Life. [cf. 1 Jn.1:1] And if this seems, perhaps at times, distant from us; if it feels that it belongs only to a remote past, overshadowed now by the busyness and contingencies of our daily struggles, how do we draw near? How can we know the risen Saviour; how can He still speak to us from between the two angels on the Mercy Seat?

14] Well, it's not through any fault of His, for as he promised, He is always with us, even to the end of the age. [cf. Matt.28:20] It is, rather, for us to draw near to Him. 'If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness,' St John tells us this morning in the Epistle. 'We lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.' It is required of us that we strive to put away the Old Adam and his way of thinking; that the more we diminish our own ego, the closer we come to Christ. The more we overcome our self, our own will that can only gaze inward, the more we find ourselves in the company of the life-giving, risen Lord.

15] In the end it was the Myrrhbearers' love for Christ that carried them through all the difficulties they faced; not the crippling fears and anxieties of Peter and the other disciples, who hid themselves away, but the grace that comes to us through our love for God. And as for all those people, more than eighteen-hundred of them who rejoiced with us here at the Paschal Vigil, why are they not with us today? How, when as soon as they enter the inevitable busyness and

sufferings of this life, will they know the risen Christ; how will they hear Him speaking, if they don't drawn near to listen? But we shall abide here, members of the body of Christ. For in offering up like spices the incense of our prayers, we shall find the healing of His forgiveness; in learning obedience to His commandments, we shall find the true source of our freedom; and in the grace of the Holy Mysteries administered in His Holy Church, shall come to know that the image of our lowliness shall be conformed to the image of His holiness.

Christ is risen!