

The Three Days' Loss

The Three Days' loss of Our Lord is a topic which is strangely little probed into, considering that his behaviour in that event is so fraught with mystery.

The Jewish man was bound to go if possible three times yearly to Jerusalem for the stated ceremonies. These were the Passover which would correspond to our Easter, the Feast of Weeks which would correspond to our Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. St Joseph would attend all of these three. Women were not bound to attend them at all, but most likely Mary accompanied him at the Pasch bringing Our Lord with her.

At the age of twelve a boy legally became a son of the law, subject to all its minute prescriptions and liable to the decreed forfeits and penances if he violated any of the enactments. So at that age Jesus would go rather than be brought to Jerusalem. In reality he was in a completely different category to everybody else. Subject to the law, he was at the same time the Master of the law.

The people of each place travelled together; they would assemble into caravans for that purpose. The distance from Nazareth to Jerusalem was 89 miles, representing

a five-day march. There was a routine for this journey. This comprised the singing of certain of the Psalms which referred particularly to Jerusalem. With the passage of each mile there was the slow building up of intense expectation, rising to heights of excitement and fervour as the Holy City drew nigh. This cannot even dimly be imagined today when the world can be circled in forty hours (soon in twenty), and when men have seen everything either actually or on screens. The men and women walked in separate sections and very probably, though there was no special rule on this subject, the young people gravitated together.

Jerusalem at the Paschal time was an incomparable spectacle. Many Jews came from abroad. An immense concourse of people, two and a half million it is claimed would assemble in the city. The time to be spent there was seven days, and the procedure for each day was minutely laid down.

The final ceremony towards which everything else worked up was the Feast of the Passover – the eating of the Pasch. The lamb of the sacrifice was immolated and then eaten, all standing ready for the road, staff in hand, as the Israelites had done when leaving Egypt. Every item of this was full of symbolism and prophecy and indication, all pointing towards the future Redeemer. The lamb, prophetically tied to two pieces of wood in the form of a cross, was immolated and eaten prepared with bitter herbs and a red sauce according to the ancient tradition. With what painful intensity would Jesus follow the detail of that abstruse, bloody ritual! For it all concerned him and stood for him.

The pilgrims ate the unleavened bread and then when the last Alleluias died away, they started on their homeward

journey. Again they walked in separate companies, even leaving the city by different gates. This meant that Joseph and Mary would not meet until the first night's halt. The Holy Family would have stayed with relatives during those seven days and they would have celebrated the Passover with them.

It is certain that Mary and Joseph would have made sure that Jesus was in the final mustering for the homeward journey. After that he could have been either with his mother or with the men or with the young Galileans. The first stop of the caravans is alleged to have been at El Birch, a place ten miles from Jerusalem. That would have represented a half day's journey because the Pasch took place in the early part of the day after which they set forth.

At that halt Mary and Joseph met. After a little wonderment as to where the child was, the awful discovery was made that he was missing. Their anguish was extreme. It is to be remembered that they had lived in fear concerning him for a long time. He was a wanted man, a refugee. Their terror had been eased when they were in Egypt. When they came back after Herod's death, they found his son, Archelaus, upon the throne. He was a pitiless tyrant in the mould of his father. So they feared to live in Judea and settled down in Galilee when Antipas, another son of Herod, was the ruler. He was a milder specimen, but he would not spare them if their identity transpired. And so their minds were never wholly free from apprehension.

But now they are in Archelaus' territory, and Jesus has disappeared! Has he been identified and apprehended? Spies were everywhere and everything unusual was investigated. Could it be that someone has discovered that there in Jerusalem is the real objective of the massacre

of the Innocents eleven years before? Undoubtedly that thought would present itself to Mary and Joseph with paralyzing effect.

It is impossible to believe that they reconciled themselves to wait for the next morning. So they retraced their steps along the lonely road, hoping against hope that they might encounter him. They could not believe that his action was voluntary, and their agony concentrates on the thought of Archelaus.

The darkness of the night was like noon compared with Mary's emotions. She who was light itself was now darkness, not knowing what God was doing with her. On reaching Jerusalem, they would at once go to their relations and friends to see if Jesus was with them, or to find if anybody had word about him. Of course there was no word. They then proceeded during the day to ransack every corner of the city, desperately enquiring as to whether anyone had seen the child. Over and over again they would repeat their description of him. We may try to imagine how those two loving people would seek to portray him!

In the accounts given by the visionaries it is stated that Mary and Joseph did find a number of persons who claimed to have seen such a child and even to have spoken to him. But who could be sure? Those same visionaries say that the plight of Mary and Joseph during those days was extreme, worse by far than death, such that they had to be divinely preserved from dying.

It is likewise declared that this time, which is commemorated by the third Dolour of Our Lady, was the cause of such suffering to Jesus himself as to be worse than all the other pains of his life, this by reason of the extreme agony he was causing to his beloved parents.

The torture of Mary in this Dolour was worse, it is even suggested, than what she suffered at Calvary, because on Calvary in the midst of her shocking torment, she was witnessing Redemption, and she knew it. Also in the sixth and seventh Dolours, which relate to the taking down of Our Lord from the Cross and the placing of him in the tomb, she knew that Redemption was accomplished. That realisation must have represented a mitigation of her unspeakable woe. She knew too that soon she would see her Beloved once again.

But here in the search of three days there is no consolation, not a gleam. She is without him and she does not know where he is, nor in what plight. She has been left in total darkness. It is said that Joseph and herself did not touch food during that entire time.

But as the three days in the tomb came to an end in the Resurrection, so did these unutterable days terminate in the finding of Jesus. At the beginning of the third day they went to the Temple where they had already gone often in the belief that it would attract Jesus. Entering by the eastern gate, they heard his voice. At that place there is a spacious room, referred to by St Paul, where the interpreters of the law sat and answered questions. It was a sort of Academy where they organised discussions.

And now perhaps, by reason of the profundity of this matter, I had better forsake my own words and have recourse to the sacred text itself. It is the second Chapter of St Luke which, incidentally, comprises in its fifty-two short verses: The Birth of Our Lord, the Circumcision, the Presentation in the Temple, the Flight into Egypt, and the Three Days' Loss – a unique conglomeration of mighty circumstances.

‘And not finding him they returned into Jerusalem seeking him. And it came to pass that after three days they found him in the Temple sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his wisdom and his answers. And seeing him they wondered. And his mother said to him: Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said to them: How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business. And they understood not the word that he spoke unto them’ (Lk 1:45-50).

Why did Jesus thus absent himself at the cost of such appalling suffering to Joseph and Mary and to himself?

Also there is the arresting statement that they did not understand what he said to them. I deal with this latter point first. Some people, including most Protestants, regard Our Lord’s address to his parents as a rebuke. Strangely too, the French Catholic writer, Daniel-Rops, describes his words as cruel and harsh. With these suggestions one cannot have patience. People who speak thus do not understand Jesus and they do not appreciate Mary. For why should he speak roughly to his own mother, who is standing before him at that moment with the ravages of grief so desperately marked upon her face? Thus to disobey the Fourth Commandment would be a fine example. It would be an incredible opening up of Christianity that the very first words of Jesus proclaimed in the gospel should be such as that.

Already she had done more for him than any other mother ever did or would do for her child. And in that way of total love and sacrifice she would continue. She was the noblest creature who had ever lived. She was, as one

of the great Protestant poets describes her, 'poor tainted nature's solitary boast'. She was the only completely clean thing that humanity would ever produce, the only one with whom God would fully have his way. So it would go beyond strangeness if he were thus to decry his mother before all men. For the vital fact is to be noted that the scriptures record his words for reading by all generations. Therefore we can dismiss indignantly that stupid suggestion that Jesus was acting harshly towards her.

The second point is the statement that Mary and Joseph did not understand what he spoke to them. The saints and the doctors argue much over this. They find it hard to believe that Mary's illuminated mind, the mind of the Immaculate Conception, did not understand. I confess myself at a loss as to why this should puzzle them. The illumination of her immense intelligence proceeds from God, and to the extent to which he wills. Everything in her was vast. But it was limited. She was not infinite. Obviously there must be recesses in God which even Mary does not probe, and we can believe that the Three Days' Loss was one of these. *Why* is another matter.

It is to be marked that it was from Mary that St Luke learned this account. No one else had any knowledge of it. St Joseph had passed away. It is more than probable that St Luke put it down in the very words which she used. He would fear exceedingly to revise what she said lest he should colour the description differently. One would not alter the revelation of a saint. How impossible then to think of interfering with the words in which the Mother of God set out this inscrutable episode!

What a mystery it is! In all the gospel narration is there a page so full of mysteriousness as this one? It would be blasphemous to regard Our Lord's abstraction of himself

from Mary and Joseph as a boyish prank. Likewise it would without profound reason be the height of cruelty on his part to nearly kill his parents with such grief. And so we must turn away from such inferior and merely human suggestions to seek one which would worthily fit into the mighty drama of Redemption. Let us apply ourselves to this for a moment.

Unquestionably this withdrawal of himself from the two persons whom he loved most on Earth was a part of the essence of his Messiahship. As much so as the Presentation, the Agony in the Garden, and other manifestations; and just as full of meaning. Perhaps if we could read the scriptures with sufficient discernment, we would find that the event fulfils a prophecy.

Not only is it permissible but it is our duty to try reverentially to draw meanings from that extraordinary affair. In the first place it must have had connection with Our Lord's arrival at manhood under the law which is pointed to in the text.

In the second place may not the episode be a conforming of himself to the condition of the paschal lamb prior to the time of its sacrifice? Never let us say to ourselves that we are straining too far and seeing too much. Because in these divine things the opposite is the case; we discern but part of the meaning. We are only seeing as through a glass darkly.

The lamb, as the code lays down, was taken from its mother four days before the time of its sacrifice and was kept in the house during that time. On the fourth day it was sacrificed. In the case of the Lamb of God, the fourth day, the day of his immolation on Calvary, lies twenty years ahead. But in the mind of God time of preparation and the day of sacrifice are but one single, connected action.

This would provide a possible explanation of the three days' separation of Jesus from his mother. Whether it goes deep enough or is the true one is another matter.

One of the most intriguing problems of this mystery is the manner in which Jesus spent his time during those days. Scripture tells us nothing on the subject, nothing beyond the bare item which I have quoted for you. But the 'revelations' of the visionaries on this point are copious. You will understand that these particular communications, of which there are a vast number, are most desirable to read and meditate on. They give us food for thought and much of them is certainly true, but we are not bound to accept them. They tell that he begged his bread. That is feasible, for otherwise how could he sustain himself. Also that he sought out the sick and the desolate and rendered all manner of services to them, and that at night he slept on the bare ground beside the walls of houses. They say that he prayed long in the Temple. This would be certain indeed, for the paschal lambs due for sacrifice were kept in the pastures of the Temple. Why should the great Paschal Lamb not act similarly? Would he not seek to assimilate his condition to theirs; they were representing him.

I would think it unquestionable that he attended the daily sacrifice in the Temple, because of it he would one day be the fulfilment. Would not that coming together of the future victim and the present foreshadowing in the ordinary poor victims lend quite a special efficacy to the sacrifice of that particular day?

Would he not also be likely to visit every place in and around Jerusalem which would figure later in his Passion, such as the Garden of Gethsemane, the Praetorium where he would be tried and sentenced to death; Calvary; the

Cenacle in which he would eat his own last pasch on Earth, and where the Eucharist would be instituted, where the Holy Spirit would descend, and which would be the first Vatican of the Catholic Church. Surely too he would go to the scenes of his future Resurrection and Ascension?

He was found in the Temple speaking with the professors of the law and asking them questions. As a writer beautifully imagines it: 'There he stood with something of the dawning dignity of youth and more of the sunny beauty of childhood. He stood in the Temple of which every stone, every pillar, every ornament was symbolic of him and of her who bore him. He was the verification of them all.'

Had he been at those discussions during the previous two days?

It is said that on that third day they were deliberating about the Messiah whose time was near according to the prophecies so that the subject was engaging the minds of men.

It is also told by the visionaries that those doctors in their arguments were inclining to the idea of a triumphant Messiah, a National Deliverer. And that Jesus through highly intelligent questions and comments brought out the real sense of the prophecies and pointed to a suffering Messiah and a spiritual order as being the divine programme.

In contemplating Our Lord's actions during those three days, we must not regard him as behaving like an adult. In the Presentation, he had been bound by his state as a baby. He submitted wholly to being offered by his mother. No portent proceeded from him. Those that did mark the occasion came from Simeon and Anna. The same idea would be shown in the Three Days' Loss. He would not

outstep his natural condition. In his approaches to people in Jerusalem, such as those we have been considering he would be a boy – winsome, preter-naturally good and intelligent, but yet a boy. We may be sure that he did not notably exceed this in the Temple discussions or act so as to evoke the suggestion that he was the Messiah-to-be.

It is most probable, as I have suggested, that St Luke's description reproduces Our Lady's very words to him. These seem to indicate that during Our Lord's time on Earth he had not enlightened her as to the reason for this episode. This deepens still more the mystery. If he had enlightened her, would she not have related it to St Luke, who would have recorded it for all posterity and for us? No, it is left as a secret which we may and must affectionately probe.

That action of withdrawal was not a mere gesture of independence by him. For immediately the gospel goes on to assure us that he went down with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth and was subject to them. Then the inspired record meaningfully adds: 'His mother kept all these things carefully in her heart,' which is the scriptures' way of telling us that she was storing them up for future transmission to the writers of the gospels.

It is significant that the New Testament accounts of both the Presentation in the Temple and the Three Days' Loss end in the same postscript so to speak, that 'they went down to Nazareth and he was subject to them'.

The transfer from the deep abyss of being without Jesus to the regaining of him was the cause of such an extreme of happiness to Mary that it has been deemed fit to be numbered among those five summits of her bliss which are named the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary.