

SAINT JOHN OF DAMASCUS

SERMON I ON THE DORMITION

[147] THE memory of the just takes place with rejoicing, said Solomon, the wisest of men; for precious in God's sight is the death of His saints, according to the royal* David. If, then, the memory of all the just is a subject of rejoicing, who will not offer praise to justice in its source, and holiness in its treasure-house? It is not mere praise; it is praising with the intention of gaining eternal glory. God's dwelling-place does not need our praise, that city of God, concerning which great things were spoken, as holy.† David addresses it in these words: "Glorious things are said of thee, thou city of God." What sort of city shall we choose for the invisible and uncircumscribed God, who holds all things in His hand, if not [148] that city which alone is above nature, giving shelter without circumscription* to the supersubstantial Word of God? Glorious things have been spoken of that city by God himself. For what is more exalted than being made the recipient of God's counsel, which is from all eternity?

Neither human tongue nor angelic mind is able worthily to praise her through whom it is given to us to look clearly upon the Lord's glory. What then? Shall we be silent through fear of our insufficiency? Certainly not. Shall we be trespassers beyond our own boundaries, and freely handle ineffable mysteries, putting off all restraint? By no means. Mingling, rather, fear with desire, and weaving them into one crown, with reverent hand and longing soul, let us show forth the poor first-fruits of our intelligence in gratitude to our Queen and Mother, the benefactress of all creation as a repayment of our debt. A story is told of some rustics who were ploughing up the soil when a king chanced to pass, in the splendour of his royal robes and crown, and surrounded by countless gift bearers, standing in a circle. [149] As there was no gift to offer at that moment, one of them was collecting water in his hands, as there happened to be a copious stream near by. Of this he prepared a gift for the king, who addressed him in these words: "What is this, my boy?" And he answered boldly: "I made the best of what I had, thinking it was better to show my willingness, than to offer nothing. You do not need our gifts, nor do you wish for anything from us save our good will. The need is on our side, and the reward is in the doing. I know that glory often comes to the grateful."

The king in wonder praised the boy's cleverness, graciously acknowledged his willingness, and made him many rich gifts in return. Now, if that proud monarch so generously rewarded good intentions, will not Our Lady (h ontwV agaqh despoina), the Mother of God, accept our good will, not judging us by what we accomplish? Our Lady is the Mother of God, who alone is good and infinite in His condescension, who preferred the two mites to many splendid gifts. She will indeed receive us, who are

paying off our debt, and make us a return out of all proportion to what we offer. Since prayer is absolutely [150] necessary for our needs, let us direct our attention to it.

What shall we say, O Queen? What words shall we use? What praise shall we pour upon thy sacred and glorified head, thou giver of good gifts and of riches, the pride of the human race, the glory of all creation, through whom it is truly blessed. He whom nature did not contain in the beginning, was born of thee. The Invisible One is contemplated face to face. O Word of God, do Thou open my slow lips, and give their utterances Thy richest blessing; inflame us with the grace of Thy Spirit, through whom fishermen became orators, and ignorant men spoke supernatural wisdom, so that our feeble voices may contribute to thy loved Mother's praises, even though greatness should be extolled by misery. She, the chosen one of an ancient race, by a predetermined counsel and the good pleasure of God the Father, who had begotten Thee in eternity immaterially, brought Thee forth in the latter times, Thou who art propitiation and salvation, justice and redemption, life of life, light of light, and true God of true God.

The birth of her, whose Child was [151] marvellous, was above nature and understanding, and it was salvation to the world; her death was glorious, and truly a sacred feast. The Father predestined her, the prophets foretold her through the Holy Ghost. His sanctifying power overshadowed her, cleansed* and made her holy, and, as it were, predestined her. Then Thou, Word of the Father, not dwelling in place,† didst invite the lowliness of our nature to be united to the immeasurable greatness of Thy inscrutable Godhead. Thou, who didst take flesh of the Blessed Virgin, vivified by a reasoning soul, having first abided in her undefiled and immaculate womb, creating Thyself, and causing her to exist in Thee, didst become perfect man,, not ceasing to be perfect God, equal to Thy Father, but taking upon Thyself our weakness through ineffable goodness. Through it Thou art one Christ, one Lord, one Son of God, and man at the same time, perfect God and perfect man, wholly God and wholly man, one Substance (upostasiV) from two perfect natures, the Godhead and the manhood. And in two perfect natures, the divine and the human, God is not pure God, [152] nor the man only man, but the Son of God and the Incarnate God are one and the same God and man without confusion or division, uniting in Himself substantially the attributes of both natures. Thus, He is at once uncreated and created, mortal and immortal, visible and invisible, in place and not in place. He has a divine will and a human will, a divine action and a human also, two powers of choosing (autexousia) divine and human. He shows forth divine wonders and human affections--natural, I mean, and pure. Thou hast taken upon Thyself, Lord, of Thy great mercy, the state of Adam as he was before the fall, body, soul, and mind, and all that they involve physically, so as to give me a perfect salvation. It is true indeed that what was not assumed was not healed.* Having thus become the mediator between God and man, Thou didst destroy

enmity, and lead back to Thy Father those who had deserted Him, wanderers to their home, and those in darkness to the light. Thou didst bring pardon to the contrite, and didst change mortality into immortality. Thou didst deliver the world from the aberration of [153] many gods, and didst make men the children of God, partakers of Thy divine glory. Thou didst raise the human race, which was condemned to hell, above all power and majesty, and in Thy person it is seated on the King's eternal throne. Who was the instrument of these infinite benefits exceeding all mind and comprehension, if not the Mother ever Virgin who bore Thee?

Realise, Beloved in the Lord, the grace of to-day, and its wondrous solemnity. Its mysteries are not terrible, nor do they inspire awe. Blessed are they who have eyes to see. Blessed are they who see with spiritual eyes. This night shines as the day. What countless angels acclaim the death of the life-giving Mother! How the eloquence of apostles blesses the departure of this body which was the receptacle of God. How the Word of God, who deigned in His mercy to become her Son, ministering with His divine hands to this immaculate and divine being,* as His mother, receives her holy soul. O wondrous Law-giver, fulfilling the law which He had Himself laid down, not being bound by it, for it was He who enjoined children to show reverence to [154] their parents. "Honour thy father and thy mother," He says. The truth of this is apparent to every one, calling to mind even dimly the words of holy Scripture. If according to it the souls of the just are in the hands of God, how much more is her soul in the hands of her Son and her God. This is indisputable. Let us consider who she is and whence she came, how she, the greatest and dearest of all God's gifts, was given to this world. Let us examine what her life was, and the mysteries in which she took part. Heathens in the use of funeral orations most carefully brought forward anything which could be turned to praise of the deceased, and at the same time encourage the living to virtue, drawing generally upon fable and fiction, not having fact to go upon. How then, shall we not deserve scorn if we bury in silence that which is most true and sacred, and in very deed the source of praise and salvation to all? Shall we not receive the same punishment as the man who hid his master's talent? Let us adapt our subject to the needs of those who listen, as food is suited to the body.

Joachim and Anne were the parents of Mary. Joachim kept as strict a watch over [155] his thoughts as a shepherd over his flock, having them entirely under his control. For the Lord God led him as a sheep, and he wanted for none of the best things. When I say best, let no one think I mean what is commonly acceptable to the multitude, that upon which greedy minds are fixed, the pleasures of life that can neither endure nor make their possessors better, nor confer real strength. They follow the downward course of human life and cease all in a moment, even if they abounded before. Far be it from us to cherish these things, nor is this the portion of those who fear God. But the good things which are a matter of desire to those who possess true knowledge,

delighting God, and fruitful to their possessors, namely, virtues, bearing fruit in due season, that is, in eternity, will reward with eternal life those who have laboured worthily and have persevered in their acquisition as far as possible. The labour goes before, eternal happiness follows. Joachim ever shepherded his thoughts. In the place of pastures, dwelling by contemplation on the words of sacred Scripture, made glad on the restful waters of divine grace, [156] withdrawn from foolishness, he walked in the path of justice. And Anne, whose name means grace, was no less a companion in her life than a wife, blessed with all good gifts, though afflicted for a mystical reason with sterility. Grace in very truth remained sterile, not being able to produce fruit in the souls of men. Therefore, men declined from good and degenerated; there was not one of understanding nor one who sought after God. Then His divine goodness, taking pity on the work of His hands, and wishing to save it, put an end to that mystical barrenness, that of holy (geofronoV) Anne, I mean, and she gave birth to a child, whose equal had never been created and never can be. The end of barrenness proved clearly that the world's sterility would cease and that the withered trunk would be crowned with vigorous and mystical life.

Hence the Mother of our Lord is announced. An angel foretells her birth. It was fitting that in this, too, she, who was to be the human Mother of the one true and living God, should be marked out above every one else. Then she was offered in God's holy [157] temple, and remained there, showing to all a great example of zeal and holiness, withdrawn from frivolous society. When, however, she reached full age and the law required that she should leave the temple, she was entrusted by the priests to Joseph, her bridegroom, as the guardian of her virginity, a steadfast observer of the law from his youth. Mary, the holy and undefiled (panamwmoV), went to Joseph, contenting herself with her household matters, and knowing nothing beyond her four walls.

In the fulness of time, as the divine apostle says, the angel Gabriel was sent to this true child of God, and saluted her in the words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Beautiful is the angel's salutation to her who is greater than an angel. He is the bearer of joy to the whole world. She was troubled at his words, not being used to speak with men, for she had resolved to keep her virginity unsullied. She pondered in herself what this greeting might be. Then the angel said to her: "Fear not, Mary. Thou hast found grace before God." In very deed, she who was worthy of grace had found it. She found [158] grace who had done the deeds of race, and had reaped its fulness. She found grace who brought forth the source of grace, and was a rich harvest of grace. She found an abyss of grace who kept undefiled her double virginity, her virginal soul no less spotless than her body; hence her perfect virginity. "Thou shalt bring forth a Son," he said, "and shalt call His name Jesus" (Jesus is interpreted Saviour). "He shall save His people from their sins." What did she, who is true wisdom, reply? She does not imitate our first mother Eve, but rather improves upon

her incautiousness, and calling in nature to support her, thus answers the angel: "How is this to be, since I know not man? What you say is impossible, for it goes beyond the natural laws laid down by the Creator. I will not be called a second Eve and disobey the will of my God. If you are not speaking godless things, explain the mystery by saying how it is to be accomplished." Then the messenger of truth answered her: "The Holy Spirit shall come to thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. Therefore He who is born to thee shall be called the Son of God." That which is foretold is [159] not subservient to the laws of nature. For God, the Creator of nature, can alter its laws. And she, listening in holy reverence to that sacred name, which she had ever desired, signified her obedience in words full of humility and joy: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word."

"O the depth of the riches, of the wisdom, and of the knowledge of God," I will exclaim in the apostle's words. "How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways." O inexhaustible goodness of God! O boundless goodness! He who called what was not into being, and filled heaven and earth, whose throne is heaven, and whose footstool is the earth, a spacious dwelling-place, made the womb of His own servant, and in it the mystery of mysteries is accomplished (to pantwn kainwn kainoteron apotelei musterion). Being God He becomes man, and is marvellously brought forth without detriment to the virginity of His Mother. And He is lifted up as a baby in earthly arms, who is the brightness of eternal glory, the form of the Father's substance, by the word of whose mouth all created things exist. O truly divine wonder! O mystery [160] transcending all nature and understanding! O marvellous virginity! What, O holy Mother and Virgin, is this great mystery accomplished in thee? Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Thou art blessed from generation to generation, thou who alone art worthy of being blessed. Behold all generations shall call thee blessed as thou hast said. The daughters of Jerusalem, I mean, of the Church, saw thee. Queens have blessed thee, that is, the spirits of the just, and they shall praise thee for ever. Thou art the royal throne which angels surround, seeing upon it their very King and Lord. Thou art a spiritual Eden, holier and diviner than Eden of old. That Eden was the abode of the mortal Adam, whilst the Lord came from heaven to dwell in thee. The ark foreshadowed thee who hast kept the seed of the new world. Thou didst bring forth Christ, the salvation of the world, who destroyed sin and its angry waves. The burning bush was a figure of thee, and the tablets of the law, and the ark of the testament. The golden urn and candelabra, the table and the flowering rod of Aaron were significant types of thee. From thee arose [161] the splendour of the Godhead, the eternal Word of the Father, the most sweet and heavenly Manna, the sacred Name above every name, the Light which was from the beginning. The heavenly Bread of Life, the Fruit without seed, took flesh of thee. Did not that flame foreshadow thee with its burning fire an image of the divine fire within thee? And Abraham's tent most clearly pointed

to thee. By the Word of God dwelling in thee human nature produced the bread made of ashes, its first fruits, from thy most pure womb, the first fruits kneaded into bread and cooked by divine fire, becoming His divine person, and His true substance of a living body quickened by a reasoning and intelligent soul.* I had nearly forgotten Jacob's ladder. Is it not evident to every one that it prefigured thee, and is not the type easily recognised ? just as Jacob saw the ladder bringing together heaven and earth, and on it angels coming down and going up, and the truly strong and invulnerable God [162] wrestling mystically with himself, so art thou placed between us, and art become the ladder of God's intercourse with us, of Him who took upon Himself our weakness, uniting us to Himself, and enabling man to see God. Thou hast brought together what was parted. Hence angels descended to Him, ministering to Him as their God and Lord, and men, adopting the life of angels, are carried up to heaven.

How shall I understand the prediction of prophets ? Shall I not refer them to thee, as we can prove them to be true? What is the fleece of David which receives the Son of the Almighty God, co-eternal and co-equal with His Father, as rain falls upon the soil? Does it not signify thee in thy bright shining? Who is the virgin foretold by Isaias who should conceive and bear a Son, God ever present with us, that is, who being born a man should remain God? What is Daniel's mountain from which arose Christ, the Corner-Stone, not made by the hand of man ? Is it not thee, conceiving without man and still remaining a virgin? Let the inspired Ezechiel come forth and show us the closed gate, sealed by the Lord, and not yielding, according to his [163] prophecy--let him point to its fulfilment in thee. The Lord of all came to thee, and taking flesh did not open the door of thy virginity. The seal remains intact. The prophets, then, foretell thee. Angels and apostles minister to thee, O Mother of God, ever Virgin, and John the virgin apostle. Angels and the spirits of the just, patriarchs and prophets surround thee to-day in thy departure to thy Son. Apostles watched over the countless host of the just who were gathered together from every corner of the earth by the divine commands, as a cloud around the divine and living Jerusalem, singing hymns of praise to thee, the author of our Lord's life-giving body.

O how does the source of life pass through death to life? O how can she obey the law of nature, who, in conceiving, surpasses the boundaries of nature? How is her spotless body made subject to death? In order to be clothed with immortality she must first put off mortality, since the Lord of nature did not reject the penalty of death. She dies according to the flesh, destroys death by death, and through corruption gains incorruption (fqora [164] thn afqarsin carizetai), and makes her death the source of resurrection. O how does Almighty God receive with His own hands the holy disembodied soul of our Lord's Mother! He honours her truly, whom being His servant by nature, He made His Mother, in His inscrutable abyss of mercy, when He became incarnate in very truth. We may well believe that the angelic choirs waited to

receive thy departing soul. O what a blessed departure this going to God of thine. If God vouchsafes it to all His servants--and we know that He does--what an immense difference there is between His servants and His Mother. What, then, shall we call this mystery of thine? Death? Thy blessed soul is naturally parted from thy blissful and undefiled body, and the body is delivered to the grave, yet it does not endure in death, nor is it the prey of corruption. The body of her, whose virginity remained unspotted in child-birth, was preserved in its incorruption, and was taken to a better, diviner place, where death is not, but eternal life. Just as the glorious sun may be hidden momentarily by the opaque moon, it shows still though covered, and its rays illumine the darkness [165] since light belongs to its essence. It has in itself a perpetual source of light, or rather it is the source of light as God created it. So art thou the perennial source of true light, the treasury of life itself, the richness of grace, the cause and medium of all our goods. And if for a time thou art hidden by the death of the body, without speaking, thou art our light, life-giving ambrosia, true happiness, a sea of grace, a fountain of healing and of perpetual blessing. Thou art as a fruitful tree in the forest, and thy fruit is sweet in the mouth of the faithful. Therefore I will not call thy sacred transformation death, but rest or going home, and it is more truly a going home. Putting off corporeal things, thou dwellest in a happier state.

Angels with archangels bear thee up. Impure spirits trembled at thy departure. The air raises a hymn of praise at thy passage, and the atmosphere is purified. Heaven receives thy soul with joy. The heavenly powers greet thee with sacred canticles and with joyous praise, saying : "Who is this most pure creature ascending, shining as the dawn, beautiful as the moon, conspicuous as the [166] sun? How sweet and lovely thou art, the lily of the field, the rose among thorns; therefore the young maidens loved thee. We are drawn after the odour of thy ointments. The King introduced thee into His chamber. There Powers protect thee, Principalities praise thee, Thrones proclaim thee, Cherubim are hushed in joy, and Seraphim magnify the true Mother by nature and by grace of their very Lord. Thou wert not taken into heaven as Elias was, nor didst thou penetrate to the third heaven with Paul, but thou didst reach the royal throne itself of thy Son, seeing it with thy own eyes, standing by it in joy and unspeakable familiarity. O gladness of angels and of all heavenly powers, sweetness of patriarchs and of the just, perpetual exultation of prophets, rejoicing the world and sanctifying all things, refreshment of the weary, comfort of the sorrowful, remission of sins, health of the sick, harbour of the storm-tossed, lasting strength of mourners, and perpetual succour of all who invoke thee."

O wonder surpassing nature and creating wonder! Death, which of old was feared and hated, is a matter of praise and blessing. Of old [167] it was the harbinger of grief, dejection, tears, and sadness, and now it is shown forth as the cause of joy and rejoicing. In the case of all God's servants, whose death is extolled, His good pleasure

is surmised from their holy end, and therefore their death is blessed. It shows them to be perfect, blessed and immoveable in goodness, as the proverb says: "Praise no man before his death." This, however, we do not apply to thee. Thy blessedness was not death, nor was dying thy perfection, nor, again, did thy departure hence help thee to security. Thou art the beginning, middle, and end of all goods transcending mind, for thy Son in His conception and divine dwelling in thee is made our sure and true security. Thus thy words were true: from the moment of His conception, not from thy death, thou didst say all generations should call thee blessed. It was thou who didst break the force of death, paying its penalty, and making it gracious. Hence, when thy holy and sinless body was taken to the tomb, the choirs of angels bore it, and were all around, leaving nothing undone for the honour of our Lord's Mother, whilst apostles and all the assembly of the Church burst into [168] prophetic song, saying: "We shall be filled with the good things of Thy house, holy is Thy temple, wonderful in justice." And again: "The Most High has sanctified His tabernacle. The mountain of God is a fertile mountain, the mountain in which it pleased God to dwell." The apostolic band lifting the true ark of the Lord God on their shoulders, as the priests of old the typical ark, and placing thy body in the tomb, made it, as if another Jordan, the way to the true land of the gospel, the heavenly Jerusalem, the mother of all the faithful, God being its Lord and architect. Thy soul did not descend to Limbo, neither did thy flesh see corruption. Thy pure and spotless body was not left in the earth, but the abode of the Queen, of God's true Mother, was fixed in the heavenly kingdom alone.

O how did heaven receive her who is greater than heaven? How did she, who had received God, descend into the grave? This truly happened, and she was held by the tomb. It was not after bodily wise that she surpassed heaven. For how can a body measuring three cubits, and continually losing flesh, be compared with the dimensions of heaven? It was rather [169] by grace that she surpassed all height and depth, for that which is divine is incomparable. O sacred and wonderful, holy and worshipful body, ministered to now by angels, standing by in lowly reverence. Demons tremble: men approach with faith, honouring and worshipping her, greeting her with eyes and lips, and drawing down upon themselves abundant blessings. Just as a rich scent sprinkled upon clothes or places, leaves its fragrance even after it has been withdrawn, so now that holy, undefiled, and divine body, filled with heavenly fragrance, the rich source of grace, is laid in the tomb that it may be translated to a higher and better place. Nor did she leave the grave empty; her body imparted to it a divine fragrance, a source of healing, and of all good for those who approach it with faith.

We, too, approach thee to-day, O Queen; and again, I say, O Queen, O Virgin Mother of God, staying our souls with our trust in thee, as with a strong anchor. Lifting up mind, soul and body, and all ourselves to thee, rejoicing in psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles, we reach through thee One who is beyond our reach on account of

His Majesty. If, as the divine Word made flesh taught us, [170] honour shown to servants, is honour shown to our common Lord, how can honour shown to thee, His Mother, be slighted? How is it not most desirable? Art thou not honoured as the very breath of life? Thus shall we best show our service to our Lord Himself. What do I say to our Lord? It is sufficient that those who think of Thee should recall the memory of Thy most precious gift as the cause of our lasting joy. How it fills us with gladness! How the mind that dwells on this holy treasury of Thy grace enriches itself.

This is our thank-offering to thee, the first fruits of our discourses, the best homage of my poor mind, whilst I am moved by desire of thee, and full of my own misery. But do thou graciously receive my desire, knowing that it exceeds my power. Watch over us, O Queen, the dwelling-place of our Lord. Lead and govern all our ways as thou wilt. Save us from our sins. Lead us into the calm harbour of the divine will. Make us worthy of future happiness through the sweet and face-to-face vision of the Word made flesh through thee. With Him, glory, praise, power, and majesty be to the Father and to the holy and life-giving Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.