

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT – TALITHA CUMI!

When we try to picture to ourselves our Blessed Lord in the midst of the poor of Palestine, we must bear in mind that a crowd of poor, such as we are accustomed to, is respectable compared with an Eastern crowd. Dirty, ragged, and afflicted beyond anything we can imagine, were those among whom His days were spent. They "thronged Him, pressing upon Him to touch Him as many as were diseased. They stayed Him that He should not depart from them." They poured into the house where He was, "so that He could not so much as eat bread," says St. Mark. Think what this means.

Everything in our Lord was most delicate and refined. He was more sensitive than any of us to what is unsightly and unpleasant. Yet He never complained, or seemed to notice what must have distressed Him sorely. He bore with these poor people. He let them press upon Him and touch Him. How often He was weary of standing and speaking, of going here and there as He was wanted, of satisfying the endless needs of such a multitude! For they could never have enough of Him. Used to seeing themselves objects of contempt and disgust to the Pharisees, they beheld with wonder and delight the gentleness and tender compassion of their new Rabbi, and in His company forgot everything else, even consideration for Him.

It was not often that He sought to escape from the people. But one evening as they showed no signs of returning home for the night, He said in a low voice to His disciples:

"Let us go over to the other side of the Lake." They were only too glad to obey, for He was quite spent, and this was the only way to get Him a little rest. So a few of them hurried Him down to the beach, and when the others who had stopped behind to dismiss the crowd joined them, they all got into the boat and pushed off. He seated Himself in the stern, resting His head on a rough pillow there, the steersman's cushion, and very soon was asleep. The disciples watched Him in silence or talked quietly among themselves about the parables which, in the intervals of that long day's preaching, He had explained to them apart. They did not like to come out with their difficulties before the people, but when alone with their Master they put their questions to Him, and He was so careful to explain all, that He used to ask them:

"Have you understood all these things?" He was asleep, and, as the boat glided smoothly over the still, moon-lit waters, they sat around Him, speaking little, content to gaze upon that calm, beautiful face, so tired and yet so restful. They were half way across the Lake, some dozing, some talking round the pilot, when a shriek of the night wind made them all start. In a few minutes a furious tempest was upon them. Down between the mountains swept the hurricane, lashing the water into wild, crested billows. Helpless on the heaving sea, the boat rose and fell, now sinking into the hollow, now mounting a monstrous wave, now plunging again into the depths. The water poured in, it was filling fast—and still He slept. For a while the disciples dared not wake Him, but fear overcoming at length every other feeling they crowded round Him crying:

"Lord, save us, we perish!" He woke, and looked calmly into those terrified faces.

"Why are you fearful," He said, "O ye of little faith!" And rising up He rebuked the wind, and said to the sea:

"Peace, be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was made a great calm. And they feared exceedingly. They

did not fall at their Master's feet pouring out their thanks in eager words. But they crouched before Him, whispering in trembling tones to one another:

"Who is this, that He commands the wind and the sea and they obey Him?"

To these men of the Lake the first feeling brought by this sudden stilling of the storm was one of overpowering fear. Who was it they had amongst them, that treated them as familiar friends, that ate, and drank, and slept in their midst? Who was it?—God, the Lord of the wind and sea. Jesus their Master, their Friend, was very God—and they feared exceedingly.

Smoothly over the placid waters the boat made the rest of its way. It was early morning when they ran it into a little bay on the eastern shore of the Lake, the land of Gadara, or Gergesa. The disciples were stepping on shore, scarcely recovered from the terrors of the night, when a new fear seized them. Bounding down from one of the caves hollowed in the cliff came a wild creature, more like a beast than a man. His eyes glared in a frightful manner. He had long since torn to shreds the clothing that hung about him. He lived in the gloomy caverns in the rocks that were used as graves, and "he was exceeding fierce, so that no man could pass that way." No man could tame him; iron chains he snapped like flax. Day and night he roamed about the mountains, crying and cutting himself with stones. He was a demoniac. Seeing Jesus afar off, he ran to Him, and, falling down, adored Him. And, crying out with a loud voice, he said:

"What have I to do with Thee, Jesus Son of the most High God ? I beseech Thee do not torment me."
And Jesus asked him:

"What is thy name?" And he said, " Legion."

"For many devils were entered into him," says St. Luke. And the spirits besought Him that He would not command them to go into the abyss. And there was there near the mountain a great herd of swine feeding, in number about two thousand. And the devils said:

"If Thou cast us out, send us into the swine." And He said to them: "Go!" And they going out went into the swine, and the whole herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea and were stifled in the waters. And the men in charge of them fled into the city and told the news—how the fierce demoniac, the terror of the country, had been healed, and how the swine had perished. Strange to say, it was the last event that seemed to make the most impression on the townsfolk, for instead of rejoicing at the cure of the poor man, " they were taken with great fear. And the whole city went out to see what was done. And they came to Jesus, and saw him that had been troubled with the devils sitting at His feet, clothed and well in his wits."

And—poor, foolish people—all the multitude being seized with terror, besought Jesus to depart from them. And He went up again into the ship. The man who had been troubled with the devils begged earnestly that he might be with Him. It seemed to him that only in our Lord's presence could he be safe and happy. But Jesus told him that he had a work for him to do among his countrymen:

"Return to thy house" He said, "and tell how great things God hath done to thee." And he went through the whole city publishing the great things Jesus had done for him.

On reaching the western side of the Lake, they saw the shore thronged with people. Here at least our Lord was welcome. "The multitude received Him gladly, for they were all waiting for Him." He came among them and was surrounded at once by petitioners of every kind.

Presently the crowd made way with pitying words for a man whose face was sad and troubled. He was Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue. He had a little daughter, his only one, about twelve years old, and she was dying, and he had come to see if our Lord would go home with him and cure her. The poor father fell down at the feet of Jesus, and his voice was broken by sobs:

"My daughter is at the point of death, but come, lay Thy hand upon her that she may be safe and may live." Our Lord went with him, accompanied by the multitude, curious to see what would happen. They went fast, for the father knew every moment was precious. But as they neared the house one of the servants came up to Jairus and his face told his tale:

"Thy daughter is dead," he whispered, "trouble not the Master farther." But Jesus hearing said kindly:

"Fear not, believe only and she shall be safe." It was a dismal scene around the house. The relatives, musicians and hired mourners had already arrived in preparation for the burial that would take place before night. From the room where the child lay came sounds of wailing mingled with the doleful music of the flute. Our Lord went in, and, finding the minstrels and the mourners making a rout, He said:

"Give place, for the girl is not dead but sleepeth." And they laughed Him to scorn, "knowing that she was dead," says St. Luke. He put all out of the room except Peter, James and John and the father and mother of the child. There, on a low pallet, she lay, white and still, her little hands joined upon her breast, fragrant spices strewn about her. Jesus took one of the small, chill hands in His, and in tones low and tender as her mother's, when she waked her from sleep, said:

"Talitha cumi!"—Little maid, arise. And her eyes opened, and, when she saw Him she smiled. And she rose up and began to walk about before them all; father and mother, beside themselves with joy, watching her in silence. Then our Lord told them to give her something to eat. And, leaving the happy three together, He went out with His disciples.

Think how miracles, following fast upon one another like this, must have strengthened the faith of the Twelve. Within a few hours they had seen the wind and the sea, the devils, and death itself obey Him whom they called "Master." And along with their faith grew their admiration and veneration, their love and their trust. For He whose word nothing could resist lived among them as one of themselves. When they journeyed together, exposed to cold, rain, and sun, when they stopped by the wayside to take their scanty meal, He fared no better than the rest. Humble and kind, ready to answer all their difficulties and to defend them against their enemies, patient with their slowness and their mistakes, watchful to see that nothing should hurt them, and

to provide for all their wants—such was the Master to whom they had given themselves. He did not spoil them. He corrected their faults and let them share the hardships of His Life, for they were to carry on His work amidst all kinds of sufferings when He was gone, and they had to be trained for this. But He would not let things be too hard for them. St. Peter, it is said, used to tell how, when they spent the night with Him on the mountain side, sleeping around Him whilst He prayed, He would rise from His prayer and go amongst them, and if the night was chill and He found any of them slightly covered, He would wrap them up better against the cold. Is it wonderful that these poor, rough men loved Him as they did?

When He told them one day that He was going to send them out to preach, they were not frightened, for they knew that with His help they could do all things. They were to spread the good tidings that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. They were to go without money or provision for their journey, but with the wonderful powers He would give them:

"Heal the sick," He said, "raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils: freely have you received, freely give." And they went two and two through the towns, preaching the Gospel and healing everywhere.

It was at this time that St. John the Baptist's wonderful life came to a close. For twelve months he had been imprisoned in the gloomy fortress of Machaerus for declaring the king's marriage with Herodias, his brother's wife, to be unlawful. It was a terrible place that underground dungeon for one who had lived all his life in the free air of heaven. And there was other pain as well. His life had been spent in making ready the road for our Blessed Lord. And now he was left alone in his prison, seemingly abandoned. Our Lord did not go to see him and did nothing for him. But he never complained, his patience was not exhausted, his faith remained unshaken. He did not want to be released, but only to do God's Will, and to carry on as long as he could the work for which he was sent. Even in prison he went on preparing his Master's way. For, finding that some of his disciples who were allowed to visit him did not yet believe in Jesus, he sent them to Him with this question:

"Art Thou He that art to come or look we for another?" He knew quite well that Jesus was the Messiah, but he wanted his disciples to know and follow Him. He must have been aware that his own death could not be far off. Herodias would never rest till she had got rid of him, and he wanted his faithful followers to be safe among our Lord's disciples before the end came. Jesus, who knew St. John's motives in asking this question, answered, not by words but by deeds. As the messengers stood around Him, He cured many sick, and to many that were blind He gave sight:

"Go," He said, "and relate to John what you have heard and seen." And they went away believing in Him.

Meanwhile the wicked Herodias, who could not feel safe so long as John lived, was casting about for some means of bringing about his death. Herod's birthday brought her chance. The king kept the day with the utmost magnificence, and in the evening made a great supper for the chief men of his kingdom. The castle palace of Machaerus was brilliantly lighted up, and the sound of music mingled with the shouts of the revellers penetrated even into the dungeon where the holy Baptist lay. When the merriment in the banqueting hall was at its height, Salome, the daughter of Herodias, came in to amuse the guests. She danced before them and was loudly applauded by all who sat at table. Then Herod, half intoxicated, and scarcely knowing what he was

saying, swore to her:

"Whatsoever thou shalt ask I will give thee, though it be the half of my kingdom." The girl, delighted, slipped out of the hall and said to her mother:

"What shall I ask?"

"The head of John the Baptist," was the answer. Salome returned with haste to the king:

"I will," she said, "that thou forthwith give me in a dish the head of John the Baptist." What a demand from the lips of one little more than a child! All who heard it shuddered. But what would the king do? Every eye was turned upon him. Every eye saw upon his face the signs of the struggle going on within. He was struck sad, for he revered John and had often heard him gladly. Yet because of his oath—an oath wicked to make, more wicked still to keep—and to appear honourable in the sight of those who sat at table with him, he granted the horrid petition. One of his bodyguard was standing behind him with a naked sword in his hand. He was despatched to the prison with orders to bring the head into the hall.

There was silence now in that scene of revelry, and suspense, horrible but short. Presently the door reopened, and the gory head was brought in upon a dish. Then, in the sight of all, the king gave it to the unflinching girl, who bore it off in triumph to her mother. When the disciples of John heard what had befallen their beloved master, they took the body and buried it, "and came and told Jesus," says St. Matthew. The royal murderer never had another peaceful hour. That ghastly sight in the banqueting hall was constantly before his mind. When he heard of the wonderful works of Jesus, he cried out:

"John the Baptist is risen from the dead," and he wanted to see our Lord. He did see Him one day, and on that day the measure of his wickedness was filled up.