

HER FAITH TOUCHED ME

An extract from *The Passion of the Image* by Sister Anne Eason OSB.

This is a fresh look at Mary Salome, the Mother of St John and comes from Chapter 17.
The main focus is the moment on Calvary when Our Lord gives John to His Mother and vice versa.
You are free to quote from it, but please acknowledge.

The biological mother of John was present on Calvary when John was given by the dying Christ to His own Mother. It is Mark who names Mary Salome as being on Calvary.¹ But the Johannine text says: "... standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home."² We know from Mark that when Jesus looked, He saw standing by His cross, the holy women, including Mary Salome, with His Mother and John. But for John's purposes, he and Our Lady were focussed upon at this moment. It is significant that John's biological mother was present for this and I want to look more closely at her before moving on to the Lord's words from the Cross. It is also perhaps a testimony to the humility of Mary Salome that her son John did not refer to her in his Gospel at that moment.

An extract from the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land puts Mary Salome in context: "Salome (Mary Salome), St. Her feast is on Oct 22 in Mart. Rom. She was the wife of Zebedee and mother of the apostles James, the Greater, and John. She stood by the cross of Jesus and took part in His burial (Mk 15, 40; 16, 1). She asked that her sons might sit, one on the right hand of Jesus and one on the left in His Kingdom (Mt 20, 20). - On Oct 22, the Franciscan Community of Nazareth makes a pilgrimage to the village of Yafa, 5 kms south of Nazareth, and celebrates Holy Mass in the Chapel of St. James. Yafa is inhabited by Moslems and by Christians (Greek-Orthodox, Latins, Melkites)."

I have regularly quoted the Ethiopian Synaxarium in these studies because of the historic relationship between Jerusalem and Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Church is one of the oldest expressions of Christianity. The stories and traditions it has preserved both from its Jewish and Christian heritage give insights which are not found elsewhere, into the lives of the saints from both Testaments. The emphasis of the Ethiopian Synaxarium is also of interest in the details they have preserved which may or may not be historical fact but handed down in their tradition. The Franciscan Custody records their material about Salome: "Salome, the sister of our Holy Lady, the Virgin Mary. Salome is 'saluted' by the Ethiopian Synaxarium on the 25th of Genbot: This Salome made bold to touch the seal of Mary's virginity, and her fingers were burned by

¹ Mark 15, 40; 16, .1

² John 19.25 ff.

divine fire; but as soon as she touched the Child Jesus, she was healed, and her fingers became as before. She sometimes carried Jesus in her arms during the flight to Egypt. She saw Him on the day of His Resurrection, before the Apostles saw him. In the Upper Room of Sion, the Holy Spirit came down upon her and the holy women.”

Right: *Galilee Chalice: Digital Artwork Sister Anne Eason OSB.*
In this chalice, resting upon the Lake of Galilee, I have sought to describe the Paschal Mystery. What began in Galilee for James and John, would be fulfilled in Jerusalem. The darkness symbolizes the suffering, the rising sun, the Resurrection, the transparency locates the mystery in the Eternal where it enters Time.



The Ethiopian Synaxarium sees Salome as the sister of Our Lady and present at the birth of Our Lord and during the Flight into Egypt: “Salome, the daughter of the sister of Our Lady Mary. The Ethiopian Synaxarium relates on the 8th of Sane: Joseph rose up, and took our holy Lady, the Virgin Mary, and her Child, and Salome, the daughter of the sister of Our Lady, and they came to Egypt, and to Dabra Kueskuarn (or Ayn es Shems, the fountain of the Sun) (Heliopolis). And Our Lord Jesus made this fountain of water to spring up, when He was with His mother, and it exists to this day.”³

There are two or three legends or traditions in the Catholic Church about where Mary Salome might have been after the Resurrection. There is also uncertainty about whether she was the sister of the Blessed Virgin or a cousin. Some narratives place her in the boat which was set upon the sea without oars, with the Magdalen, Martha and Lazarus, as a form of martyrdom. This boat was believed to have miraculously come to rest on the shores of France where these saints are said to have lived and/or died. But it is likely that Mary Salome did, like the Magdalen, spend time in Ephesus with the Blessed Virgin after John had brought her there. Why not? She was devoted to her (she is said to have added ‘Mary’ to her name in honour of Christ’s Mother) and the Early Christians travelled around the Levant with relative ease during that period, it would seem. This aspect of Salome’s time is important as it has a bearing on how we view her presence on Calvary when Christ bequeathed her son to Our Lady.

Mary Salome was John’s mother, and according to Gospel accounts, was with the Lord and His disciples in the Public Ministry. She was a woman of immense faith who, like many of the Holy Women, believed Christ’s warnings and promises. From that faith she approached him for her sons. We are not told how she perceived the Kingdom and He clarified the nature of it in response to her request. Her strength is reminiscent of Martha’s.

³ Extracts from Mertens Encyclopaedia, the Franciscan Custody.

I think St. Bede is correct when he says that John and James had agreed with her beforehand how she would approach Our Lord, but he also makes the point that they knew that Mary Salome was greatly loved by the Lord: "... when the sons of Zebedee demanded of the Lord that they might seat themselves in His kingdom, He immediately called upon them *to drink of His chalice*, that is, to imitate the struggle of His passion.

Thus they were to keep in mind that to seek the highest places in heaven presupposes first traversing the humiliations and harsh trials of our earthly existence. No one should suppose that the mother made this request on behalf of her sons without their consent and desire for it; rather it should be understood that this stratagem was the result of their unanimous agreement. Thus it was through their mother, whom they knew to be greatly loved by the Lord, that the disciples made known to Him their wishes."⁴

Mary Salome's openness and transparency, and Christ's obvious love for her, also made it possible for Him to give her son to another Mother on Calvary, and that Mother to her son in her presence. He knew her and had confidence in her insight and generosity. Mary Salome was loved by all, humble, strong and faithful. That quality of love in her was also in John, which enabled him to abide, to wait for Our Lord to come for him, though he would doubtless have preferred to have left this world much sooner.

How John left this world when his Lord came for him is surrounded by stories expressive of his exceptional spiritual beauty. Mertens Encyclopaedia has this entry about the tradition that John was assumed into heaven, rather like Elisha and Enoch perhaps, and it is honoured in some churches: "*Assumption of John near Ephesus*: The Assumption of John the Evangelist refers to the Gospel of John 21, 23 'The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say, to him that he was not to die, but 'if it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you?' The Melkite liturgy has the Assumption of John the Evangelist on Sept 26. The Martyrologium of Jerusalem has it on Dec 27."

Mary Salome's faith did indeed touch Our Lord. Mark tells us in 15.40 and 16.1 that she was present at the burial of Christ and that means that she had at all levels given her son to Our Lady. Whatever humble task she performed in laying her Lord to rest it was with faith that she touched Him, or His effects, in that duty. I am convinced that she believed that the Resurrection would happen, as she stood on Calvary. She had immense purity of heart at this moment of destiny. If we return to Hesse's idea that the artist and poet takes his being from his mother then John's purity of heart and a certain simplicity came originally from his biological mother. Mary Salome might well have been among Christ's family when He was told they were standing outside wanting to talk to Him.⁵ He replied that those who do the will of God are 'my mother and sister and brother...' That saying works both ways. Mary Salome was doing God's will, and she was therefore, in her faith, both His mother, and sister.

⁴ St Bede the Venerable, Homily as used on the *Feast of St. James*, in *Lectionnaire Monastique*.

⁵ Matthew 12.47. Luke 8.20.



*Lament over the
Dead Christ
by Fra Angelico,
tempera-on-
panel, Museo
nazionale
di San Marco in
Florence.*

In the Aramaic of Matthew 28.9 Mary Salome was among the myrrh bearing women *running* ܐܪܝܢܐ (ORoH+oN) with fear and with great joy from the empty tomb. The Aramaic text says literally that *He met up with them* ܦܕܕ (P'G,aE) and they drew near/touched ܡܬܝܒ (QaReB) Him, grabbed/held/took ܐܡܬܐ (AoKHeD) His feet and worshipped Him ܐܡܬܬܐܢܐ (OSoG,D'iYN). This is the same verb we explored above in relation to John bowing his head upon the breast of Christ when discussing the fact that God is Spirit. It is from ܡܬܝܒ (SG,eD) which means 'to worship, to do homage, to bow down.' Here at this post Resurrection encounter, there is a prophetic fulfilment of what Christ said to Photina at the well of Sychar: "and those who worship [Aramaic ܡܬܝܒܐܢܐ (D'NeSG'D,uON)] Him, in spirit and in truth must they worship". This they did on the road to the Resurrected Christ and Photina may well have been among the Holy Women at that moment.

Having got to know Mary Salome a little in these pages, when revisiting her request to Our Lord on behalf of her sons, it is clear that this came from a bedrock of faith and humility in her, a simple belief which expressed hers and her sons' commitment to Our Lord. This in no way supports the sometimes-harsh portrayal of her as an ambitious mother.⁶

⁶ Joseph Gebhardt-Klein has exegeted Logion 61 of The Gospel of Thomas where it refers to the person of Mary Salome and this can be found at: <https://nevada-reno.academia.edu/JosephGebhardtKlein>. It is an excellent study of this Logion from the Coptic, Hebrew and Aramaic.