

Good Friday, April 14, 2006

## Joseph of Arimathea: In Secret, Now Out

John 19:38

“After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.”



The first Good Friday was a long and sad day. A nightmare roller coaster! And when Jesus cried his last words and said: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). It seemed that all was over, except the crying. I’m sure that many went home to beat the rush, like sports fans in the last minutes of a lopsided game. Some sad, although perhaps not many, but all were probably not so sure at what happened!

I’m not sure we all know what really happen that day either. O! We know the implications and the reasons, but every detail sometimes, we haven’t paid enough attention to, the fact is we still waver in the accounts and proceedings that took place back then, at least we don’t stand in the same way Jesus stood on our behalf.

But there is more, that because we are not so sure, we waver in our faith practice, which if we continue the way it is will give way to de total decline of Christendom. Yes, it is true that the future of the Church is in God’s Hands and it is his decision for the Church to fall or stand, that is correct, but God works through His people and their willingness to not only stand in and for their faith but also the practice of it.

I think that one of the concerns we have, I know, I do, is the expansion of the Muslim faith with their ISIS ideology and taking the world by force. I wonder how we could stand their threats and impositions. And not only stand but even fight them, as we must, but the question is how should we fight? And I think the question is not so much how, but can we stand against them? And not only can we stand the Muslim threats which are obvious, but what about the not so obvious threats that assail us unnoticed here in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We can and we ought to, but only if we practice our faith not in secret but boldly and openly. Failure to do so will prove the end of Christendom as we have known it.

Therefore on this Good Friday it will do us good going back to that first Good Friday and learn from a man who also practiced his faith in secret but that upon Jesus death he was moved to come to the open: Joseph of Arimathea.

We have seen the facts surrounding Jesus’ death, tried, crucified, and all was finished! Jesus said it “it is finished!” Salvation plan was over, but the practice and the outcome of his death was just beginning. There comes a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected “member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” (Mark 15:43)

But who was Joseph of Arimathea? According to John and Matthew he was a disciple of Jesus, but it is possible that he also sat in on the trial of Jesus, but “who had not consented to (the council’s) decision and action.” (Luke 23:51)

And now that it was all done with, he asks for the body of Jesus, and after he got permission to take it, he wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb.

Now, other than what we know already, there’s nothing really that grabs our attention about all that, except what Mark tells us in his gospel: he “took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” (Mark 15:43) And what does Mark mean by that?

Our text spells it out further. “After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus...”

Joseph was looking for the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises and knew the Word of God concerning the Savior. But when he saw and heard Jesus, the Word of God brought Joseph to faith. He believed, but he didn’t want anyone to know. Why didn’t he want anyone to know? He was afraid! He was afraid of the Jews—the religious rulers of Israel, who probably were his friends and relatives in high places, and his associates and clients on the council.

Joseph believed the truth, but the truth was no more popular then than it is now. The belief in Jesus was risky stuff for Joseph. He was a rich man who had a lot to lose if he didn’t go along with the popular views. Not only was he rich, but he was also a man of position.

Yes, he was on the council, the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court and the law-making body of the Jews. Wrong politics or religion could get you thrown out. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah was both. So, being a good and upright man, Joseph would work within the system to do what he could to keep things fair for Jesus, but he would not admit to believing in Jesus.

He would protect his vested interests—money and position—but also hold on to the truth. He would live in two worlds and believe in secret.

Though Joseph tried to protect himself, something more powerful and more important than self-preservation confronted him: the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

He could not witness the trial, the crucifixion, and the death of Jesus and remain silent. He could not remain a secret believer. In this case faith and belief destroyed secrecy! The opposite could have been also true, that secrecy could destroy belief and faith. We cannot practice our faith in secret, something needs to happen, either our faith opposes and destroys secrecy or we lose by letting secrecy destroy our faith.

But for sure in as in Josephs’ case, when God’s word is remembered, the Word did its work in Joseph. I’m sure the words of Jesus brought Joseph out of hiding, as Jesus said: “...but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 10:33). Jesus was who he said he was, and Jesus’ words would not pass away.

It is Joseph who gave Jesus the burial cloth known as the shroud. It is this secret believer who spoke out before Pilate and who still speaks today, he didn’t stay in secret for long, he couldn’t!

Just like today, Joseph of Arimathea reminds us today that you and I can't remain secret believers. We often want to, and more than not we try to hide our faith. Why? Because we too are afraid! We're afraid of others and what they'll think and do. Belief in Jesus is risky for us. We don't run the risk of been killed, yet... but deep down we are afraid, aren't we! And even ashamed of being Christian!

Dare we say what we believe at school or around the crew at work, our team mates or fishing buddies? Belief in Jesus challenges the beliefs of others. Not going along with your friends is a challenge. It could cost you a friend.

It's often shameful to raise questions about what someone else finds acceptable or fashionable. We don't even invite our un-churched family members visiting us for the weekend to join us for Church, instead we opt to stay with them, it is impolite to leave them alone, right? Expressing your faith could cost you your job. What's the sense of blowing the whistle on someone if it means cutting your own throat? You have to be practical, don't you?

Joseph reasoned like that, until he reached the point where he had to stand for and on the truth. Belief destroyed the secrecy. He spoke out. He found the courage. What gave him that courage? Knowing that Jesus was truly God!

The fact that Joseph couldn't hide his faith back then is evidence that we cannot either in the present. Doing so could mean the death of our faith and the giving up of our salvation.

The four Gospel accounts record the witness that Joseph gave for Jesus. This was not a common criminal who died on the cross, but a man worth the dignity of burial: a King, the God-man, the one who died in your place, for your forgiveness and life eternal.

There has been so much fuss around the Shroud of Turin, but all is meaningless for the Shroud is not the evidence that creates faith in Jesus, nor is it the place to which we look to add to our faith, yet it is interesting that the whole investigation into its authenticity keeps the Gospel account of Joseph's testimony of Jesus before the eyes of the world.

Because Joseph buried Jesus in a shroud, the discussion of the Shroud of Turin reminds us of Joseph, and not just Joseph but his faith and his courage in coming out of secrecy. Hidden belief is before the eyes and ears of the world.

Here is a miracle of faith in the middle of a time that doesn't believe in miracles. It's the testimony of this Joseph, who was given courage, went boldly because of the cross, and spoke.

If we were put on trial today, would there be enough evidence to convict you and me of being Christian, a believer in Jesus as God in the flesh? Maybe we, too, need the courage of our convictions—the boldness of our belief not to be secret believers, but to speak out for him. May be we too need that miracle to happen; maybe we too need to pray that the Lord would grant us courage that matches our faith and more! It is time to come out of our secret comfort zone and be who and what God wants us to be, and called us to be. As leaders, as members, as children of God! Who are not afraid of Satan himself and proclaim boldly God's word here and now, and everywhere you go.

Not only do we have the first evidence that Joseph had, but we also have the evidence of nearly two thousand years of Church history: the finds of historians, archaeologists, and even the investigation into the shroud.

Above all, and most important, we have the evidence of the prophetic Word of God made more sure. We do have His word and the gifts of grace He's given us, the Word and the Sacraments. Because we are saved, because we are redeemed, and because we are given such wonderful and powerful means of grace there is no more reason to stay and believe in secret any more.

On this we can take a stand, and nothing in this world is more certain or sure, for Jesus truly is the Son of God. Amen.