

“Joseph Was There”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of Joseph of Arimathea (July 31)

Primary Text: St. Luke 23:50-56 (other Gospels also referenced relating to this)

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Commemoration of Joseph of Arimathea, is the Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 23. The title of the sermon is “Joseph Was There”.

One of the things that people who study the Bible or hear the true story of Jesus sometimes notice is the absence of his earthly father Joseph during the Passion narrative. We sang minutes ago, *“Where you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree? Where you there when they laid Him in the tomb?”* The answer for Joseph appears to be no. This is strange because he plays a big role in the earlier narrative about Jesus’ birth. Why would he not be there when Jesus needed him the most? The Bible is silent on what happened to Joseph, but the logical explanation is that he had died before Jesus began His ministry. But there would be someone there that we focus on today. Someone who coincidentally, or maybe not coincidentally, had the same name as the man who raised Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea, who the Church remembers on this day.

Joseph of Arimathea only is named in the Bible in regards to the burial of Jesus. His role is important, though, as it is chronicled in all four of the Gospel accounts. From each of the four Gospel records we learn something about Joseph of Arimathea and what he did. Our text this morning is St. Luke’s telling, but the sermon will bring in aspects revealed by all of the other divinely inspired Gospels

as well. And the burial of Jesus is important. It is the final of the six steps in His “State of Humiliation”. In the Apostles’ Creed we confess that Jesus “was crucified, died, and was buried” and in the Nicene “He suffered and was buried.” The facts that Jesus’ body was prepared for burial, laid in a tomb, and then that tomb sealed are further evidence that Jesus was very much dead after the crucifixion. He had not just “swooned” or “passed out.”

And the figure central to the burial of our Lord Jesus is none other than Joseph of Arimathea. The Bible specifically tells us that this Joseph was from a town called Arimathea, which was a Jewish city. We don’t know its exact location, but it was in Samaria and about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Likely this small-town boy had moved to Jerusalem as this is where his work was and where he planned to be buried. The Evangelist St. Luke also describes him as “*a good and just man.*” Luke, ever the good historian, gives us the details of time, persons, and place.

He also tells us why Joseph would be considered a good and just man. Joseph of Arimathea had not consented to the decision of the Sanhedrin Council to condemn Jesus to death. This is because Joseph was a believer in Jesus as he is described as someone, “*also waiting for the kingdom of God.*” John informs us, that up to this point, he was secretly a disciple as he feared his fellow Jews. You see, Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy and powerful man. He was a member of that ruling council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. A powerful position in a body which stood very much against Jesus. Matthew specifically tells us that he was “rich” and the details of the accounts of Jesus burial bear that out. Joseph stood to lose a lot if he had publicly declared himself as a Jesus follower.

But the recent events stirred something within Joseph, and no doubt the Holy Spirit was at work. One can imagine what was running through his mind as he witnessed the recent events. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, that He was bringing the kingdom of God. And he rightly understood, unlike so many that gathered to shout “Hosanna” and wave palm branches on that first Palm Sunday. Most the crowds thought that Jesus was coming to establish a political kingdom, which would mean the end of Roman rule. Thus, they were willing to abandon Jesus when that did not happen. But we are told in the Biblical text that Joseph of Arimathea was still waiting for the kingdom of God, even after what looked like a fruitless ending to earthly life. The illegal arrest, the beatings, the show trial that condemned Jesus. Then the agonizing death on a Roman cross. Hours went by and Jesus breathed His last. A spear thrust into His lifeless body as it hung there naked for the world to hurl scorn upon. It was by this point that Joseph of Arimathea decided he could no longer be a secret disciple. His fears of anything that he could lose in earthly power and wealth would no longer rule him. He would act. He would take bold action. He would ensure that this rabbi received a proper Jewish burial. Would this “out” him? Certainly, but that no longer mattered.

In this there is a lesson for us. How often do we publicly deny Jesus? Now I am not talking about a denial like Peter where someone specifically asks us if we follow Jesus and we say no. What I talking about here is a *silent* denial like Joseph previously had. We can so easily let our fears rule us. An opportunity to share the Gospel is opened before us and we remain silent. A chance to insert the Biblical perspective on an issue is there and we don’t want to rock the boat. We think of what it may cost us if we really speak and live for Jesus. It might be

awkward, embarrassing, we might be rejected, we might even face some type of consequence for standing for the truth. As our society becomes more secular and anti-Christian it gets harder. We “chicken out”. We reassure ourselves with things like, “well, God knows my heart” and ignore the admonishment of Jesus that we are not to deny Him before others. It is in these times that Joseph of Arimathea provides a lesson for us. He had much to lose, probably much more so than most of us. He had been silent for a long time. But no more. He was going to step out and faith and let the chips fall where they may.

Thus, Joseph of Arimathea marches himself right over the Pilates’ headquarters. Likely he was even given access to Pilate due to the fact that he was an important and influential person. I also imagine Pilate was not looking forward to meeting him because he was probably thinking, “Haven’t I dealt with enough of these Jewish religious nuts today?” The request surprised Pilate. Why would this member of the Jewish Council want the body of this rebel rabbi they had just pressured him to execute? St. Mark also tells us that Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus was already dead. But upon verification of that fact, he gives permission to Joseph to receive the body of Jesus. Joseph is taking a bold step here, with risk. Pilate could have rejected his request, as bodies of criminals were often left out in the elements as gruesome messages to the populace. As an observant Jew, Joseph would also now be ritually unclean in coming into contact with a dead body-meaning that his participation in the Passover now upon them would be over. The closest equivalent for us may be if you did something to serve God, but that meant you would miss Christmas. Furthermore, his fellow Sanhedrin members, who were likely already suspicious, now would know of his love for Jesus. Regardless, Joseph is not turning back.

The dead body of the Savior is quickly taken to where it will be prepared and buried. At sunset, the Passover Sabbath would begin where no work was supposed to be done. Furthermore, Joseph is acting in accordance with Jewish Law from Deuteronomy 21:22-23 which stated that a criminal who was put to death and hung on a tree is to be removed from the tree and buried that same day. The Jewish day ended at sunset. There was work to be done. St. John tells us that another formerly secret disciple joined Joseph to help prepare and bury Jesus. This is Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night to ask questions in John 3. Now, he too, is a follower of the Messiah. As the sun sets over Jerusalem, they solemnly work. Likely tears flowed with this somber task as the battered, beaten, bloody, and lifeless body of their Master lay before them.

Incredibly, Jesus receives a royal burial. This man who was “despised and rejected” by His own, executed by an occupying power, and abandoned by almost all His disciples. This man from a small backwater town, a carpenter’s son, who was never considered wealthy by worldly standards. This marred corpse who died naked and in shame as a criminal gets the royal burial He deserves. Thanks to Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. His 12 Disciples had scattered. The leader of the band, Peter, had denied Jesus. All except John were hiding in fear. But these two formerly secret disciples are there. The Gospels account how they took the body down, they anoint it for burial, wrap it in linen, place it in the tomb, and roll a large stone in front of it. John accounts how myrrh and aloe were used to prepare the body of Jesus, 75 pounds of it. This amount of anointing elements would be incredibly expensive and only the most wealthy and important would ever receive this. This criminal was a king and was anointed as such. Then there is the tomb. It was a tomb as Luke says *“hewn out of rock, where no one had ever*

lain before.” Poor people generally could not afford such tombs. This is akin to those mausoleums in graveyards among countless headstones. Furthermore, St. Matthew lets us know that this was Joseph of Arimathea’s own tomb. This wealthy and powerful man was giving his very own future burial place to Jesus. This shows the honor he was giving to hHm. This also fulfilled prophecy. Isaiah 55:9 said about the Messiah, *“And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.”*

Think about this aspect the tomb for a moment. Joseph of Arimathea was placing Jesus in his very own tomb. But Jesus had actually already gone into the tomb in the place of Joseph. He did this through the cross. And Jesus goes into all of our tombs as well. The death that we deserved, He took on for us. The only innocent one took on all the guilt of the guilty. He died that we may live. Although the condemnation that hangs over each of us is our own fault because of our sin, Jesus steps into our place. He has gone into the tomb of death Joseph, me, you, and everyone else deserved.

What happened to Joseph of Arimathea after that first Good Friday evening? The Bible doesn’t tell us anymore about him. However, Joseph does show up in some early Christian writings such as one called the “Gospel of Nicodemus.” These writings tell us he would face persecution from his fellow Jews for following Jesus as he boldly proclaimed the truth of Jesus. He would be miraculously freed with the help of Jesus and go forth to preach the Gospel as an evangelist. Some of the writings have him helping care for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Other less reliable later traditions have Joseph bringing the Gospel to England and that he was the caretaker of the Holy Grail, taking it with him to

Britain. Regardless, the Bible tells us what we need to know about Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was there. Joseph was a wealthy and powerful man who was at first afraid to live openly for the Lord, but changed course to take this very public action of obtaining the body of Jesus as well as preparing and burying it. He would fulfill an important role in God's plan, in fulfilling prophecy Jesus would receive a proper Jewish burial.

But we know, and thanks be to God, that this burial of Jesus is not the end. While Nicodemus and Joseph lovingly, carefully, but hastily gave Jesus a burial that Friday afternoon, there were others watching what they did. St. Luke as well as the other Gospels tell us this. The women that watched the horrific scene of Jesus dying on the cross, followed to where Joseph took the body of Jesus. From verses 55-56, *"and they observed the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils. And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment."* These faithful women wanted to provide a more thorough preparation of the body at a later time-specifically after the Sabbath was over.

We know from the resurrection accounts in the Gospels that the women were the first to arrive at the tomb that first Easter morning. This detail from the end of our Gospel reading tells us how they knew where to go as they were watching the burial. The other Gospels name some of them that witnessed this, including Mary Magdalene. And when they arrived early that Sunday morning for more post-death preparation of the body, they received quite the shock. That big stone was rolled away. Jesus was not in the tomb, two angels were present, but no Jesus in there.

Jesus had victoriously risen from the dead. I said earlier that He has, in effect, gone into each of our own tombs in that He died the death that we deserve. And all believers come out of their tombs with Jesus as well. Just as Jesus walked triumphantly out of the that abode of death very much alive, He brings us out of our tombs eternally alive. The old sinful person perishes and the new creation bursts forth. He died that our tombs would not be our end, as His would not be His end. He lives eternally that we too live eternally through faith in the resurrected Christ.

Amen.