

Better Late than Never

No matter how many times I read this morning's Gospel, I can never quite decide how I feel about Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. We know Nicodemus as the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night and struggled to understand his teachings. We also know him as the Pharisee who offered a rather tepid defense of Jesus once or twice in the course of his Temple trial. We don't know even that much about Joseph of Arimathea. He appears in all four Gospels, always around the time of Jesus's execution and burial. Both men were members of the Sanhedrin, the enclave of priests that ran the Temple under Caiaphas' leadership. Both men were secret believers who concealed their support for Jesus out of fear of their fellow council members. Both men were in a position to defend Jesus during his ministry when Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin started to take notice of him. Both men were in a position to speak up during his Temple trial, maybe even to save him if they argued persuasively enough. But if we're to take the Gospels at face value, Nicodemus said next to nothing in support of Jesus during his lifetime, and Joseph of Arimathea said even less. That tells me a couple of things.

First, Caiaphas, the head priest of the Temple, must have been a political force to be reckoned with. In their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, theologians Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan explain that, during the Roman occupation of Israel, the head priest was selected and deposed at Caesar's whim. High priests typically had a tenure of about four years during this period; Caiaphas lasted eighteen. He also appears to have had a particularly cozy relationship with Pontius Pilate; as Borg and Crossan observe, the high priest and the Roman governor worked together entirely too well. While I agree with them that there's no need to demonize Caiaphas or Pilate, the stereotypical portrayal of the high priest growing increasingly apoplectic over the course of

Jesus's ministry may have some truth behind it. Nothing frustrates a powerful leader who's accustomed to getting his own way more than an opponent who keeps slipping through his grasp. Joseph, Nicodemus, and the other members of the Sanhedrin probably learned to tread very lightly with Caiaphas where Jesus was concerned.

Second, if they were worried about maintaining their influential positions, Nicodemus and Joseph may have persuaded themselves that there was no need to defend Jesus during his lifetime. We know that Jesus could handle himself in a theological debate; he regularly trounced anyone who tried to take him on. The two Pharisees might have thought he was more than capable of fending for himself, so there was no need to rock the boat. They might have convinced themselves that Jesus was never in any real danger. Perhaps they thought the Temple's laws and procedures would protect him, at least until he was dragged before a kangaroo court in the middle of the night then handed over to the Roman authorities for sentencing and crucifixion. By the time they realized how much trouble Jesus was in, they might have honestly believed there was nothing they could do to save him, so there was no reason to put themselves at risk.

Whatever motivated them before Jesus died, Nicodemus and Joseph sprang into action afterward. Joseph went directly to Pilate and boldly asked for Jesus's body. Nicodemus publicly showed up with a small mountain of expensive, fragrant resins to bury him. Perhaps the two men decided that, with Jesus dead, Caiaphas wouldn't care what happened to his body. Or perhaps they were so horrified by what had happened, and so angry with themselves for not doing more to defend Jesus while he was still alive, that they no longer cared what Caiaphas thought. They couldn't save Jesus, but at least they could give him a decent burial.

Joseph and Nicodemus knew Jesus was dead. That matters because some skeptics argue that Jesus only swooned on the cross, and his followers – perhaps Joseph and Nicodemus – took

him down, nursed him back to health, and planted another body in the tomb. Considering how badly Jesus was injured, the swoon/substitution theory is less credible than resurrection, however impossible it might seem. Joseph and Nicodemus lifted, wrapped, and buried Jesus's body. They wouldn't have left him alone in a tomb for days if there was any hope that he still lived.

In all likelihood, nothing Joseph and Nicodemus did could have stopped the Crucifixion because it was part of a divine plan that human beings couldn't derail. But they couldn't have known that. To their credit, they didn't let their shame paralyze them. It was too late to do what they probably believed they should have done, but they still could do something, and they did. Therein, I think, lies a precious lesson for the rest of us.

We know that God forgives our sins, but we don't always know how to forgive ourselves. We all make mistakes, and sometimes they turn out to be a lot worse than we anticipated. At that point, we can withdraw into our grief and guilt, resolving never again to meddle in whatever we messed up. Or we can pull ourselves together and do what we can to fix things as best we can. Even when we can't make it as though our mistake never happened or even make it right, we can do our utmost to make things better. In God's eyes, that's probably good enough.

The story of Holy Week is, among other things, a story of missed opportunities and unfortunate decisions. So many people, from Judas to Peter to Pilate to Caiaphas, could have chosen to act differently, and they didn't. Joseph and Nicodemus had plenty of company. They didn't support Jesus as soon as they could have, but they did the best they could later. The last time I preached on this passage, the title of my sermon was "Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda." Today's title is "Better Late than Never," and it feels to me more like what Jesus might say. He could condemn Joseph and Nicodemus for abandoning him at his Temple trial. But I'd bet folding

money that, when they saw him again, our Lord chose instead to thank them for taking such good care of his body until the time came for him to rise again.

Until we meet Jesus face to face, all of us are forced to do the best we can with what we have. We can trust God to forgive us when we fail short. My prayer for you and for everyone is that we can learn to forgive ourselves for the mistakes we make and, by God's grace, do better thereafter. Amen.