

Letting Faith Embolden Us

One of the many blessings of Scripture is that every passage offers so much to ponder. Today's brief passage from John's Gospel seems pretty straightforward at first. It focuses on two members of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who believed in Jesus but failed to protect or openly support him during his lifetime. After his Crucifixion, they retrieved his body, hastily wrapped it in linen and a small mountain of spices, and placed it in an unused tomb. The traditional take on this passage may be best summed up in this caustic observation from Scottish theologian Alexander McLaren: "While Christ lived, these two men had been unfaithful to their convictions; but His death, which terrified and paralysed and scattered His avowed disciples, seems to have shamed and stung them into courage. They came now, when they must have known that it was too late, to lavish honour and tears on the corpse of the Master whom they had been too cowardly to acknowledge, whilst acknowledgment might yet have availed. How keen an arrow of self-condemnation must have pierced their hearts as they moved in their offices of love, which they thought that He could never know, round His dead corpse!"

I've often agreed with McLaren that Joseph and Nicodemus offered too little, too late. Lent has weighed especially heavily on me this year, as it may have on many of you. It's tempting to condemn these men who appear to have played it safe as the wealthy and powerful so often do, protecting themselves and their esteemed positions while allowing Jesus to suffer an unspeakable fate. On more charitable days, I'm able to recognize that almost everyone involved in the Crucifixion came up short one way or another, so their belated efforts to make sure Jesus at least got a decent burial might best be forgiven as better late than never. This year, I was surprised to find something new in this passage that I'd like to explore with you.

The Synoptic Gospels tell us more than John does about what happened at Golgotha when Jesus passed away. Luke tells us that “darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” Matthew elaborates, telling us that Jesus “cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” The Roman centurion and his companions who were watching Jesus were terrified enough to blurt out, “Truly this man was God’s Son,” even though they risked a flogging or worse if their superior officers overheard. They were right. Jesus was God’s Son, and his death at the hands of humankind was a tragic, necessary step toward his Resurrection, a miracle that would change the world forever.

By the time he died, everyone knew that Jesus had promised to rise again after three days. After what had happened to him, though, it’s doubtful that anyone still expected it. Even those who loved Jesus most and sincerely believed he was the Messiah might well have concluded that resurrection was beyond even his extraordinary powers. Joseph and Nicodemus weren’t as close to him as his disciples were, but they wouldn’t have entombed Jesus if they thought there was any chance that he might still be alive and able to recover from his ordeal. He was dead, and hope seemed lost.

Yet, as they tended to his lifeless body, perhaps Joseph and Nicodemus had already begun to change for the better. Seeing his wounds would have forced them to acknowledge just how much he had suffered. The darkened skies and earthquake might have confirmed for them, as it did for the centurion, that Jesus truly was God’s Son. Once that knowledge finally sunk in, perhaps it jolted them out of the self-protective complacency that had kept them from standing

up for Jesus while he lived. And perhaps the Holy Spirit was already working in them both, giving them a shot of the same courage that would transform the frightened, defeated disciples who fled from his arrest into the lions who strode boldly across the civilized world proclaiming the good news of the resurrected Christ.

I've always assumed that Joseph of Arimathea got in to see Pilate so quickly because they were already well acquainted. On reflection, however, it's unlikely that Caiaphas would have allowed any of his priests to strike up an independent relationship with Pilate. Perhaps Joseph barged into Pilate's palace in a cloud of righteous fury, uninvited and unannounced, demanding to see the prefect and insisting that Jesus's body be surrendered to him immediately. Having seen the skies darken and felt the earthquake, Pilate might have been all too happy to give Joseph what he wanted. I've also always assumed that Nicodemus brought all those spices from a nearby market, paying for them from his own pocket to assuage his guilty conscience. Given the enormous quantity of supplies he brought on such short notice, though, I wonder if Nicodemus didn't just march into the Temple and take whatever he needed from the storage bins, looking Caiaphas dead in the eye and daring the high priest to say one word to stop him. If so, that's one encounter I would dearly love to have witnessed.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul expressed his hope "that I will not be put to shame in any way but that by my speaking with all boldness Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death." Like Paul, those who loved and believed in Jesus were emboldened by his Resurrection, suddenly able to speak and act rightly no matter the consequences. It's not that they didn't know how dangerous the world could be or how much pain they might have to endure. Jesus had already shown them those things. Thanks be to God, though, he also proved to them that evil is not invincible, death is not the end, and miracles can

happen if people are willing, in the words of the Reverend William Sloane Coffin, to “risk something big for something good.” It’s a lesson that those of us who love and believe in Jesus today are wise to heed.

We live in tumultuous times. That’s nothing new – the world has been going to wrack and ruin pretty much since our Father brought it into being. It can be scary to live out Jesus’s teachings when everything feels chaotic and so much appears to be at stake. But perhaps we can draw inspiration from Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who stepped out boldly for Jesus even before they were sure he would triumph over death. When they claimed, tended, and laid his broken body to rest, they didn’t know what would happen. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose as the world measures these things. Nonetheless, they acted on faith and did what was right. When the world presents us with opportunities to care for those whom the world calls least, may we remember to call on the Holy Spirit for courage, then allow our faith to embolden us, putting fear aside and rising to meet the world’s challenges as best we can in the name of our risen Savior. Amen.