

## Joseph of Arimathea

Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-53; and John 19:38-42.

Each of the Gospel writers refer to Joseph and each adds a little bit of background detail. They all agree that he was from Arimathea, a nondescript place so obscure that nobody today knows where it is, and at the time of Jesus death sought permission from Pilate, the Roman governor, to take the body of Jesus from the cross for burial. Mark tells us that he was “a respected member of the council, waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” Matthew adds that he was “a rich man,” while Luke says he was “a good and righteous man who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan” to have Jesus crucified. John gives us a less flattering portrait by saying that Joseph was “a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews”.

This is all the factual information we have about him, most of the rest is legendary eg He was the first person to bring Christianity to Britain. He was a merchant who visited England to buy Cornish tin. He was Mary's uncle, and brought Jesus with him to England when Jesus was a teenager. He brought the Holy Grail and hid it in a well at Glastonbury.

This legend is the basis for the famous poem by William Blake and set to music and set to music by Sir Hubert Parry as 'Jerusalem':

*And did those feet in ancient time walk on England's mountains green?*

*And was the holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen?*

I think we can be fairly certain that the answer is "no".

So let's come back to what we know of him. What kind of person was he? The gospel writers all tell us he was a man of character and integrity. Luke says he was "a good and upright man". He was honest, principled and fair-minded. Mark says he was an honourable member of the Sanhedrin, the most powerful body in Judaism at that time and within that council he was influential and respected.

I suppose people would say of Joseph that he had done well for himself. Arimathea was out in the sticks. You would not expect very much to come from there. But since coming to Jerusalem his qualities had been recognised, his career had advanced and he had gone right to the very top. Joseph could rightly be very pleased with himself. Anybody else would.

But for a long time he had felt a deep sense of unease about how far the Jewish religion had fallen from the ideals God had intended for the nation. He saw hypocrisy and self seeking everywhere. He saw the Jewish leaders compromising with the Romans in order to hold onto power. He hated the political intrigues and backstabbing among the ruling classes and he longed for something better.

Luke says he was amongst those who "waited for the kingdom of God". He recognised that if justice and compassion were to prevail, God would need to come in mighty power to the nation and this would only happen when the Messiah came.

We don't know how Joseph first came into contact with Jesus but we can be sure he had many opportunities to see and hear Jesus in person. Perhaps he had been sent out by the Sanhedrin to investigate this radical from Galilee. He would be aware of and perhaps seen some of Jesus miracles. He would have listened as Jesus taught about the coming kingdom of God and the

way of salvation. He would have heard his denunciations of the religious authorities, the hypocrisy and deadness. And all of this somehow resonated with him.

At some point he came to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah but for some time, we don't know how long, he kept it to himself. The authorities had decreed that anyone who took the side of Jesus would be put out of the synagogue. It would mean the loss of so many things - his position perhaps, his reputation, maybe even there would be financial repercussions and as hostility towards Jesus grew his life might be in danger. To throw a better light on him, maybe he thought he could be a moderating influence in the Sanhedrin. For whatever reason he felt it was better to keep his head down and stay silent about his commitment to Christ.

Apply

But now all of this was about to be tested. A decision had been taken in the council to have Jesus put to death. Luke tells us that Joseph had not consented to this decision but was outvoted. We need particularly to pray for politicians and others in the public eye who are willing to stand up for Jesus in the public square. Apply

Permission was required from Pilate the Roman governor to order the execution and to give assurance that the bodies of those being crucified would be taken down before the Passover began.

Having bodies hanging on crosses presented no problem for the Romans. Their normal custom was to leave them there for weeks on end to rot or eaten by the birds. This all served as a warning to other people not to rebel against the Emperor. For the Jews, however, it presented a great problem. It was against their religion and would bring ceremonial defilement and, as they thought, the displeasure of God. Killing the son of God was okay but leaving his body on the cross was not.

So a deal was struck with Pilate to get the bodies down quickly which explains why he ordered his soldiers to break the legs of those being crucified. Someone being crucified could suffer in incredible agony for days but if their legs were broken they would not be able to push themselves up to breathe so they would be dead within hours.

On the day Jesus was crucified, Joseph had gone to witness the scene. At some point he realised that a problem would arise about the disposal of Jesus body. He knew that in the normal course of events the soldiers would just pull the bodies off the cross and probably dump them in some landfill or at best a common grave.

Maybe Jesus disciples had some thoughts as to what should be done, but as Joseph looked round they were nowhere to be seen. He saw Jesus mother and some other women. They were so overcome and in any case they were not in a position to approach the authorities for the body of Jesus. It became immediately obvious to Joseph that he was the only person in a position to do anything. The question was, was he now ready to stand up for Jesus?

It was decision time and Joseph decided that no matter the cost he would do what he could for Jesus. What changed his mind? What brought him to that position? It was because he has been confronted by the cross.

Like the centurion at the cross who saw Jesus die, Joseph knew that Jesus was no ordinary person. While they pounded the nails, he forgave. While he hung in pain, he didn't shout curses but prayers. With his last breath he gave praise to God. It was an unjust penalty, a horrific miscarriage of justice, and Joseph, watching the innocent man die, knew he had to pick a side. He could no longer stand by silent and though he never says a word his actions speak loud—he was captivated by the cross.

What the life of Jesus had not been able to do, the death of Jesus on the cross did. As Joseph watched Jesus die that day, he made a decision. He could be silent no more. He could hide his faith no longer.

Joseph had purchased a tomb for himself in which he planned to be buried one day. Tombs that were carved out of the rock were very expensive. Only the very rich could afford one. That tomb was intended to be a permanent monument to his wealth and accomplishments.

But all that was of no consequence now. That which was so precious to him, he would give to Jesus.

First though, he needed to get permission to take the body from the cross and so with some little trepidation he made his approach to Pilate. Pilate expressed surprise that Jesus was dead so soon and sought confirmation from the commanding officer. He just wanted to be sure the job was done properly. The Jews wanted to be sure that Jesus was dead so that he would no longer be a problem for them.

The concerns of Christians around the cross - mainly women - were that Jesus body would be treated with dignity and buried properly although they could not imagine how this could possibly be achieved.

The fact that an experienced Roman soldier pronounced him dead and friends who knew him well witnessed his burial were significant for Christians in later generations.

His burial answers the so-called 'swoon theory.' This theory tries to explain away the resurrection claiming that Jesus swooned rather than died. It also answers the lie that it was not Jesus who died but someone else. This is the teaching held by many Muslims that it was not Jesus the great prophet who died on the cross. God did not allow that, in fact God lifted him to heaven. It was perhaps Judas who was crucified or another volunteer disciple who looked like Jesus.

No, Jesus truly died and was buried.

Luke informs us that "the women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid" (Luke 23:55). They were eye-witnesses observing where and how Jesus' body was positioned. There could be no mistaken identity. The women who came back after the Sabbath knew exactly which tomb to visit, and exactly where the body had been laid. So when they found the tomb totally empty, there could only be one explanation: Jesus had triumphed over death by rising from the grave just as He had taught them.

The soldiers would remove the bodies of the two criminals on either side of Jesus ignominiously and with brutality. They just wanted the job finished and get on with their lives. The whole thing was nothing to them

Contrast this with the loving care of Joseph and Nicodemus as they take the body of Jesus from the cross, anoint it and then lay it in Joseph's new tomb.

The writers tell us of the lavish provision made by Joseph and Nicodemus -75 pounds of spices and perfumes to embalm the body. Could this kind of excess indicate feelings of guilt? Were they trying to compensate in Jesus' death for their failure to stand with Christ in his life? Now they will spare no expense in caring for his dead body.

And so Joseph's "walk on" part is done. This previously unknown man from upcountry arrives on the scene at a crucial moment, plays his part and departs never to be heard of again.

Was he expelled from the Sanhedrin? Did he lose money, power, prestige and influence? We know that by touching the dead body of Jesus, he became ceremonially defiled and could not participate in the Passover. We don't know what kind of price he paid for taking such a public stand with Jesus.

## Lessons

1 Maybe for someone here God has a "walk on" part. An essential witness at a crucial moment, some contribution at a transition point in the life of the church. Something absolutely needed and no one else can meet that need.

In the sovereign purposes of God men and women are being prepared now for significant and crucial tasks in the future. We do not know what these critical tasks may be but we do know that God is already preparing a man or a woman to step forward to meet the need of that hour. Could you be that man/woman? Apply

2 Maybe for someone here God is asking us to put aside the secrecy that has marked our Christian witness for a long time now and boldly speak up for the saviour. There are many difficulties in schools and offices to witness for Jesus. The climate in our land is totally against any statement or conversation about Christ. We are told that faith is personal matter and must not under any circumstances be brought into the public sphere.

To take a stand for Jesus could well affect our relationship with colleagues, opportunities for career advancement, open us up to ridicule and rejection. So, for many Christians, it is easier to keep our heads down and live a quiet and secret Christian life. We want to be liked and accepted so we are much more concerned about what others will think about us than what God thinks about us.

Every Christian faces the dilemma and has to count the cost of a bold witness for Christ - from teenagers in high school to the highest levels of management in our great academic or business institutions the temptation is always there to serve Jesus "secretly". May God give us the grace and courage to "come out" for Jesus.

3 It is not too late to respond to a call of God in this regard. Joseph had been very hesitant and fearful for quite a long time but because we have begun our Christian life badly does not mean we must finish it badly. Like Joseph we come to the cross and we hear the words of Jesus ringing from that cross "if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me".