

# Holy Saturday: Reflections

11<sup>th</sup> April 2020

*If I stoop  
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,  
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp  
Close to my breast; its splendour soon or late,  
Will pierce the gloom: I shall emerge one day.*

(Robert Browning, *Paracelsus V*)

I don't know about you, but I find it interesting that there is no liturgy for Holy Saturday. I know; I've looked. There is no such liturgy in the Anglican *Common Worship: Times and Seasons*, and nothing official even if you look further afield to Roman, Orthodox or Coptic liturgies.

There are Easter Eve services, of course, for the end of the day – following the Jewish tradition whereby the day begins in the evening, not the morning. And there is nothing to stop us saying our daily prayers. But there isn't a form of service to mark the day between our Lord's death and his resurrection. Furthermore, this is the one day in the whole year when no Eucharist is to be celebrated. Because, without the knowledge of Easter, on Holy Saturday it looks like God's plan to save the world has just been defeated; like hope has died.

And yet, had it not been for the COVID-19 restrictions, many of us will have been found in church ... cleaning, polishing, redecorating the altar, arranging flowers, rehearsing the music, hiding chocolate eggs in the grounds ... and much more. At home, too, we're usually very busy with a number of chores including possibly cleaning the house and preparing the Easter lunch.

We don't usually stop to think deeply about this Holy Saturday and what it holds: Christ, dead and buried; disciples lost and scattered.

Perhaps we want to protect ourselves from the horror of imagining it ... We don't want to think about the despair and confusion of the disciples and instead want to skip to the good news of his Resurrection, because we know it happens in the morning.

Then again, maybe this year – as we stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives – we cannot rush to Church to prepare for tomorrow, and we can only plan for intimate Easter lunches at home; so maybe we spare a few thoughts for Holy Saturday.

## Christ, Dead and Buried ... and Secret Discipleship

### *Matthew 27:57-60*

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus.

He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him.

So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock.

He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

*Mark adds that Joseph was “a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God” (15:43).*

*Luke describes Joseph as “a good and righteous man who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action” (23:50-51).*

*John describes Joseph as a “secret” disciple, “because of his fear of the Jews” (19:38).*

*Mark adds that Joseph went “boldly” (15:43).*

*Mark specifies that Joseph “taking down the body, wrapped it...” but does not say that the tomb was Joseph’s own.*

*Luke adds that “no one had ever been laid” in this tomb before (23:53).*

*John says that Nicodemus also came with myrrh and aloes, and helped to wrap Jesus (19:39-40).*

When looking afresh at the Gospel passages recounting the death of Jesus (Matt 27:57-61; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-51; John 19:38-42), I find it striking that Joseph, ‘a rich man from Arimathea’ is also called ‘a disciple of Jesus’ (Matt 27:57 // John 19:38). He is the only other person named as a disciple in the Gospels outside of the twelve.

True, John qualifies that Joseph was a disciple ‘though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews’ (John 19:38), yet he is a named ‘disciple’ nevertheless. We learn further that Joseph was ‘a respected member of the council’ (Mark 15:43), but a ‘good and righteous man ... who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action’ working towards the demise of Jesus (Luke 23:50), and that he came forward boldly and publicly to ask Pilate himself for Jesus’ dead body (Matt 27:58 // Mark 15:43 // Luke 23:52 // John 19:38). An act of public faith.

There he is, Joseph of Arimathea, a rich and respectable man who, when all is seemingly lost with Jesus’ death, instead of running away scared like the other disciples (and in sharp contrast to Peter’s own behaviour, for Peter denies Jesus three times), Joseph declares himself openly and publicly to be a disciple of Jesus.

Joseph shares not in the chequered popularity of the itinerant teacher and healer; he shares not in the intimate bond between Jesus and the twelve that forms during travelling, talking and eating together ... Joseph shares not in the last supper. Instead, Joseph shares in the shame of apparent defeat; he shares in the ridicule; in the death; and indeed in the entombing of Jesus.

Joseph shares these with Nicodemus, another secret follower of Jesus (John 19:39) and indeed with the women who had still followed and provided for Jesus (Matt 27:55 // Mark 15 40-41 // Luke 23:49) – including Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Together, they take the dead body of Christ, prepare it with ‘spices and ointments’ (Luke 23:56) and ‘a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds’ (John 19:39), wrap it in ‘a clean linen cloth’ and bury him in Joseph’s ‘own new tomb’ (Matt 27:59 // Mark 15:46 // Luke 23:53 // John 19:40-41).

Whilst I am moved by the theological richness of these passages (including the grace of Jesus replacing Nicodemus – as a signifier of humanity – in his own tomb, Jesus’ death therefore supplanting and superseding the death of all humanity; and the gift of myrrh upon Jesus’ death paralleling the gift of myrrh upon his birth and thus bracketing Jesus’ life on earth), I am moved afresh by the act of claiming, preparing and entombing the dead body of Christ ... the mangled, bloody, reeking dead body of Christ.

COVID-19 has presented us with suffering, isolation and death. When reading about Joseph’s actions, we are presented with touch, with human contact in its most prosaic form... Touching and preparing with a dead body. We are reminded afresh of the deeply meaningful that role that nurses and doctors play right now; they, who do not shy away from touching the diseased ... or indeed the dead.

Hans Holbein manages to capture the dead body of Jesus as no other. He depicts the emaciated body laid onto a slab, turning green-grey at the edges (particularly his face and hands – the middle finger of his right hand pointing to the tomb); Jesus’ mouth open (as if frozen mid-speech, the Word of God now silent).

Hans Holbein, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521), Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel

It provokes an understanding of grief as separation. Grief makes us think that death is the worst. Worst because we are separated from those we love. It seems as if any suffering, if only it could be shared, would be more comforting than that ultimate separation. Yet imagination and experience may teach us otherwise.

Further, it encapsulates the truth that Christ understands even our death and physical degradation/decomposition; we can encounter Christ even in the tomb of our own hearts ... often full of decay. What is in our hearts right now, I wonder ... What kind of things do we keep

entombed? What are we afraid to let out? When will we fully remove the tomb stone and allow Christ in?

Consider afresh the love it would have taken Joseph, Nicodemus and the women to move and carry the dead Christ from the cross; to wash him; to anoint him ...

It was love that led them to prepare the dead body of Christ, to scrape away the blood, the dust, the filth ... and replace it with spices and ointments, with myrrh and aloes ... and wrap it in clean cloth. An act of love.

Was it an act of worship, an act of faith, too? I wonder ... Did they do all those things because they believed Jesus to be the Christ, the Messiah, the son of God? Or did they act merely out of love for Jesus the man?

For some of us, there can be times when faith seems lifeless and hope feels dead. At just such a time, Joseph stepped forward to tend with exquisite care and generosity to the dead body of his Messiah. Does this 'Holy Saturday discipleship' of Joseph resonate with anything in your experience?

Matthew wants us to understand that the stone tomb in which Joseph lays Jesus is his own. Is there a stone tomb of your own making, your own design, your own expected future, that you need to lay the crucified Jesus in? In this carefully- emphasised detail, what wisdom is Matthew pointing you towards?

I have a fresh appreciation of Joseph of Arimathea as a 'disciple' of Jesus. He didn't leave everything to follow Christ; instead carried on in his own secular work whilst privately believing in Jesus as the Messiah.

Yet, his faith, character and discipleship were evident when they were needed most. Joseph didn't concern himself with 'greatness' like the twelve; he didn't want the lime light. Instead, he loved and believed until the end ... and beyond.