

FACES AROUND THE CROSS

"Timid" Joseph of Arimathea
April 4-5, 2009 Garth Leno

Not all the faces around the cross were sinister or antagonistic. There were some that were full of tenderness and kindness. Among the sympathetic faces was that of Joseph of Arimathea. All four Gospel writers take note of this cultured and winsome man. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all deal with him in a very complimentary and gracious manner.

So let's have a look at some of the good things they have to say about him. But first, let's focus once again on the Cross and what happened at the Cross, because the Cross sets the stage for everything else...

We carefully and reverently step into the Crucifixion story at Luke 23:33.

Luke 23:33-49 NIV

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified Jesus, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One."

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Interesting... "All those who knew him...stood at a distance, watching these things." Faces around the cross... We think Joseph of Arimathea must have been one of those people in the crowd.

What do we know about him? What do we know about Joseph?

1. Joseph was a man of wealth

Matthew tells us in his gospel (Matt 27) that after Jesus died on the Cross, as evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.... (Matt 27:57 NIV)

Matthew 27:57 NIV

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph...

None of Jesus' relatives were in a position to claim his body and bury it, because they were all from Galilee and none of them owned a tomb or burial spot in Jerusalem. So the wealthy man Joseph stepped in.

Matthew tells us explicitly that he was a rich man. But he does not make a hero out of Joseph just because he has money. But Matthew mentions it, nonetheless.

2. Joseph was also a man of position.

Mark 15:42-43 NIV

It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body.

Jesus died around the ninth hour, which is three o'clock on the Friday afternoon and the next day was the Sabbath when no work could be done. But Sabbath actually started at 6:00 PM on Friday evening.

When Jesus died, it was already the time of preparation for the Sabbath, and there was no time to waste. Work had to stop at 6 PM Friday evening.

Jesus died at 3:00, so they had only 3 hours to get his body down from the cross, and prepared for burial, and placed in the tomb. After 6 p.m. the Sabbath law would come into effect and no work could be done. So Joseph acted quickly. He went to Pilate. He had the social and political position to do so. He was an aristocrat, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. He was a part of the court that tried Jesus before he was crucified.

He was a man of influence; he had authority, and he used his authority to do something good. Joseph was a man who could make things happen if and when he wanted to.

3. Furthermore, Joseph was a man of fine character.

Luke 23:50-51 NIV

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action....

That is the best that has yet been said about Joseph. Since he was a good and upright man, we may count on him using his wealth as a good steward. Since he was a good and

upright man, we can believe that he might use his office, his influence, his position to serve rather than be served, to help others instead of helping only himself.

He was a man of fine character. A good and upright man.

4. Finally, and best of all, Joseph was a disciple.

Matthew tells us that Joseph *had himself become a disciple of Jesus...*

Matthew 27:57 NIV *As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus.*

One day this man of wealth and position, this man of character and high expectation, came face to face with Jesus. We're not sure when or where it happened, but it happened. He encountered the Messiah and trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. And thus he became a follower, an apprentice, a learner, a student, a disciple of Jesus.

Yet, in spite of all these splendid qualities – in spite of being called a disciple of Jesus – Joseph had at least one glaring defect. Though a friend, he was not the kind of friend we would choose for ourselves or for the Master. Though a disciple, his discipleship was faulty.

Joseph lacked one important character quality. This virtue is admired by the young and the old, by the cultured and the uncultured, by the civilized and the barbarian. I'm talking about COURAGE. Joseph was short on COURAGE. He was too timid to confess the Master openly.

John tells it like this in Jn. 19:38... *Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.* This is an unflattering statement about an otherwise respectable, honourable man. It's an unattractive, unappealing, unbecoming statement about this good man. He was a secret disciple. But do you remember what Jesus said in Mark 8:38?

Mark 8:38 NIV *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him....*

And there's Romans 10:9-10... *If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

Open confession of faith is vital to genuine salvation. Yet we are told that Joseph was a secret disciple because he was afraid of the Jews. While we are sure that secret discipleship is a possibility, we are equally sure that it's not pleasing to God.

There may be some secret disciples here today – men or women, who follow Jesus when it's convenient, or when nobody else is watching, or when it suits you... But that's a form of discipleship that satisfies neither God nor you.

And this is true for the following reasons:

1. Secret disciples experience more obstacles.

To be a Christian at all means battle – for the enemy of our souls is prowling about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour – but to be a Christian secretly is to make that battle far more difficult, with many more obstacles to overcome.

A few years ago, in a remote native community in the far north, a police officer shot and killed a rabid wolf, but not before it attacked a young man and his grandmother in their home.

There were about 150 sled dogs in the village—more than a match for one sick wolf—yet the intruder was left alone to do her work. In order to prevent the dogs from fighting and wounding each other, they had each been tied to wooden stakes spaced far enough apart to prevent them from reaching any neighbouring animal. So each dog was isolated from the pack. Because of this, the wolf walked freely from dog to dog, killing some and badly wounding others. In isolation they were no match for their foe, and they suffered terribly for it.

And in much the same way, isolated, secret disciples present themselves as much easier prey for the schemes of the Enemy of our souls. We need to openly declare our allegiance to Jesus Christ, and stay connected to a local body of believers.

2. Secret disciples experience more failure.

The road of secret discipleship is one that is littered with catastrophe, collapse, and breakdown. For every one who succeeds as a cloak-and-dagger disciple, I am sure that hundreds fail.

We need to tell the truth about who we are...

In February (2009), Alex Rodriguez, all-star third baseman for the New York Yankees and the highest paid player in baseball, admitted taking banned substances for three years (2001-2003).

In an interview with ESPN, Rodriguez said: "I did take a banned substance. ... So I ... apologize to the fans... And, there's absolutely no excuse. ... It feels good to be completely honest. ... The truth needed to come out a long time ago, and I'm glad it's coming out today. ... The truth will set you free."

Yes, A-Rod, that's true. It feels good to be completely honest about who you are and what you do. The truth will set you free.

And that's why we can't be satisfied with being Christians in the closet. When you try to keep it underground then you deny who you are, and you deny *whose* you are, and you are more prone to spiritual failure.

3. Secret disciples experience less fruitfulness.

Joseph *did* serve the Lord, but his service for Christ was only a meagre fraction of what it might have been. Luke's gospel seeks to say the very best things about Joseph. Have another look at chapter 23, verse 50...

Luke 23:50-51 NIV

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action.

That's a good thing! Joseph did a good thing by not yielding! His non-compliance with the Council's action against Jesus was better than nothing! At least he did not throw his hat in

the ring and agree with the Council over the trumped up charges against the Messiah. So that's good....

Joseph may have tried to tell himself that was good enough; but he couldn't get away with it. Not really... I think he knew that refusing to concur with evil is not enough. It wasn't enough in Nazi Germany, and it's not enough today. It's not enough to just hold your tongue. It's not enough to be voiceless.

There are silences that are as destructive as the loudest of lies.

Suppose Joseph had taken the course that he ought to take. Suppose he had stood up before that hard and fierce court and had spoken his honest convictions:

"Gentlemen, you cannot know how difficult it is for me to take the position that I am now taking and to say what I am now going to say. I know your bitter hatred against this young Prophet called Jesus. I once shared that same hatred. But I listened to what he had to say. Having done so, I believe he is the Messiah. I have chosen him as my Lord and Master. That I have not openly confessed my faith and loyalty before is my sorrow and shame. But I confess him now, and I am proud to follow Jesus."

Suppose that Joseph had plucked up enough courage to stand in the open? There is no way to measure the good that such a daring confession might have done. But one thing for sure – he would have brought measureless joy to the heart of Jesus. Not only so, but he would have saved himself some of the hottest tears that ever burned a human face.

He missed so much by not declaring his allegiance to Jesus sooner.

And perhaps we have some people here today who are secret disciples like Joseph.

Maybe you are a student. In your heart you are seeking to be loyal to Christ, but you have never openly confessed Him, for fear of what your friends will think of you. *You're missing out!*

Maybe you are a mother or father. In your heart you want to be loyal to Jesus, but you have never openly confessed Him, perhaps not even in front of your own children....

Maybe you are in business, or a banker, or a nurse. God gives you plenty of opportunities every week to speak a simple word for Jesus – not a sermon or a long monologue – just a simple word or two – to workmates or customers – but you shrink back because you fear people more than you fear God. *You're missing out.*

*The right way to be a disciple is to be one openly;
the right time to be a disciple openly is right now.*