

Sermon – 26/11/2006 am

The Burial of Jesus

Study Text: John 19:38-42

On the Cross Jesus gave up his Spirit and died. The soldiers saw he was dead, but one of them thrust a spear into his side anyway. The Romans would have left his body on the cross to decay or be devoured by birds of prey. But the Jews wanted the bodies taken down before the Sabbath so as not to defile this holy day. Pilate gave the okay, but who was going to take the body down? And where would it be buried? The Jews buried criminals in a common grave, away from family, so as not to defile the other bodies.

The burial of Jesus is recorded in some detail in all four gospels. The burial of Jesus is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, as with every other aspect of his death, Scripture had to be fulfilled, even though none of the gospels refer to this specifically. Secondly the body of Jesus would not remain in the tomb. Jesus proclaimed, on more than one occasion, that *the Son of Man must suffer many things...be killed and after three days rise again* (Mark 8:31). Within three days this tomb would be empty. This empty tomb would become the focus of the whole world.

People

Jesus was buried by two of the most unlikely people; one we have not heard of before, and the other notorious as the man who came to Jesus by night. Joseph was from Arimathea a small town between Jerusalem and Joppa. Nicodemus was probably from Jerusalem itself. What is amazing is not so much their background but who they were. They were Pharisees, members of the Jewish ruling council or Sanhedrin. They belonged to the organisation that put Jesus on trial to condemn him to death.

Where were they on that night that Jesus was betrayed and condemned? Luke speaks up for them saying that they did not consent to the terrible injustice that was done that night (Luke 23:51). Maybe they absented themselves. Nicodemus had actually spoken up against injustice on an earlier occasion, when the Pharisees tried to arrest Jesus, but was shouted down (7:50f).

Joseph was a rich man who had become a disciple of Jesus. He was waiting for the kingdom of God. But he was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews (19:38). Nicodemus fitted much the same profile as Joseph. They probably knew each other for some time for they came together to give Jesus a proper burial. Joseph went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus; *that he might take away the body of Jesus* (19:38). This took a good deal of courage (Mark 16:43).

These secret disciples boldly came forward after Jesus had died. In a sense it was 'too little, too late'. Why did they not speak up earlier to defend Jesus? Why did they keep their faith in Jesus secret? Scripture does not condemn them directly for being secret disciples, so neither should we. Yet Jesus did speak against those who feared men more than God. He said *whoever confesses me before men I will also confess before my father who is in heaven* (Matthew 10:32). At the same time he did condemn anyone who denied him before men. This is the danger of being a secret believer.

In India we had many discussions about secret believers for it was common there. Young students who were saved out of another religion faced the prospect of being cut off from their family and being left destitute if they confessed to being a disciple of Christ. Some advised them to remain silent until they had finished their education and become independent. Others said they should openly confess Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

It was too late for Joseph and Nicodemus to try and save Jesus from death, but it was a case of 'better late than never' with regard to their own faith. They boldly went forward, even if was out of some sense of shame, to take the body of their Lord down from the Cross and give him a proper burial. They no longer feared what their fellow Jews might say or do to them. Their love for Jesus finally overcame such fear.

How much do you love Jesus? Are you sometimes ashamed to confess his name before other people? You may regret having remained silent at some time in the past. If so then draw near to the Lord and confess what you have done, or not done. Draw near to him in love, remembering the depth of his love for you. *We love him because he first loved us*; and *perfect love drives out fear* (I John 4:18, 19).

Process

The body of Jesus was not thrown into a common grave. These two men came prepared to give Jesus a proper burial according to the custom of the Jews (19:40). Joseph came with fine new linen, while Nicodemus came with lots of spices – about one hundred *litrai* or 34kg. These spices were like ground sandalwood in that they gave a strong fragrance over a long period of time.

These men were rich but they also loved Jesus so they spared no expense in his burial. This amount of myrrh and aloes was sufficient to bury a king. At the birth of Jesus Wise Men brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to the newborn King of the Jews. Joseph and Nicodemus lovingly loaded these myrrh and aloes into the strips of fine linen as they wrapped the body of Jesus in preparation for burial. They buried him like a king as the prophet Isaiah had said. Isaiah 53:9 can be translated 'his grave was appointed to be with the wicked; but with the rich man was his tomb'.

Place

Our custom is to purchase a grave site in the place where we wish to be buried. Have you bought your plot yet? In the country there is no rush, but in the city we are told to get in early? The rich man Joseph had bought an excellent site, and had hewn a tomb out of the limestone rock (Matthew 27:60). Presumably this tomb was for himself and his family. But the tomb had not yet been occupied by anyone. No one had ever lain there before (19:41, Luke 23:53). Jesus it would appear had made no such provision for himself; he would not be needing a tomb for long.

That this tomb had not yet been occupied is significant in light of what was discovered, or rather not discovered, on the morning after the Sabbath. Remember corpses were wrapped from head to toe and therefore were not distinguishable. The scene early that morning would have been somewhat different if other bodies had been in the tomb with Jesus.

That the tomb was unoccupied also important in fulfilment of prophecy. This tomb had not seen corruption. *You will not leave my soul in Hades nor will you allow your holy one to see corruption* (Psalm 16:10, Acts 2:27). This of course meant that the body of Jesus would not undergo decay like the rest of men. But at the same time being in this new tomb meant that corruption was not even near our Lord in the grave.

A second important fact regarding this tomb was its location. Jesus died sometime after 3pm. At 6pm the Sabbath started. These two men did not have much time make funeral arrangements. In passing note that they would have rendered themselves unclean for the Passover Sabbath by touching a dead body (Numbers 9:7). Joseph's tomb was nearby, in the very same garden as the Cross (19:41). They were able to carry the body this short distance in the limited time they had. The overruling hand of God the Father continued even in the burial of his own beloved Son.

Today thousands of tourists visit the 'Garden Tomb' at Jerusalem, but we cannot be sure of the exact location of the tomb in which Jesus our Lord was laid. The dimensions of this particular tomb do however fit with what we know. The tomb had a low entrance for the disciples had to stoop as they entered (20:5). The chamber would have been large enough to accommodate a number of corpses – as well as the three women who came to the tomb that glorious morning (Mark 16:5). It seems the body of Jesus was laid horizontally in a recess in the floor.

The opening of the tomb was such that a large stone could be rolled into place to seal it. Joseph and Nicodemus did just that as they left the tomb shortly before sunset on the Friday (Mark 15:46). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary stood watching them. They planned to anoint the body of their beloved Lord themselves, but the Sabbath had arrived. They would have to wait till the Sabbath was over.

Those who crucified Jesus must have been watching all this. The Pharisees and chief priests would have been pleased to see the last of this man they hated. But they did not rest easy that night. They remembered what Jesus had said about rising from the dead. The next day, the Sabbath Day, they went to Pilate and then to the tomb to make it even more secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Matthew 27:63).

So there they laid Jesus (19:42). Two men who secretly believed in Jesus came forward to bury the man murdered by their colleagues. We do not know what happened to Joseph and Nicodemus after this but hopefully they went on to openly confess the name of Jesus. Some women and few others looked on as they laid the body of Jesus in the tomb. Was this the end of the man who claimed to be sent into this world by God the Father, the one who said *the Son of Man must suffer many things...be killed and after three days rise again?*

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