

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 28, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 19:38

“Joseph of Arimathea... a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.”

PERSONALITIES OF THE PASSION

(2) The Disciple Who Wouldn't Stand Up to be Counted

It is surely significant that all the four writers of the Gospels tell about the lovely thing that Joseph did. The day Jesus died had been a day in which all His professed followers had forsaken Him and fled. Incidentally, Michelangelo's magnificent sculpture, the “Pieta” has no Scriptural warrant. There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that Mary cradled her Son's lifeless body in her arms. Likewise, the Oberammergau Passion Play has no justification for portraying His mother and a band of disciples and followers of Jesus reverently removing His body from the Cross. As the evening shadows lengthen, that poor, broken, lifeless body still hangs derelict upon the central cross on the Hill of Calvary. We would have expected that Mary, His mother, or Peter or John would have come to perform the last, sad, kindly offices for the Lord's body. But no; they were either overborne by grief or hiding in fear.

The Roman authorities didn't care whether the body was taken down from the Cross or not. It was the custom in the Roman Empire to leave the crucified body of a criminal to decay upon the Cross as a grim and grisly warning to all other potential ruffians who might see it. But, Jewish law required that the body of a person who had been executed should not remain all night upon the cross if the next day were a Sabbath or a Feast Day. If no one had intervened, the Jews would have come before nightfall, removed the body from the Cross, taken it to the nearby Valley of Gehenna, which was the garbage disposal area for Jerusalem, and there flung it down as refuse to be burned in the smoldering ashes or devoured by scavenger dogs and carrion birds.

But one man resolved to give the body of our Lord an honorable burial. His name was Joseph of Arimathea. He appears only upon this one occasion within the Gospel record. We catch a glimpse of his personality as of some flashing meteor which races across the night sky, to disappear almost at once beneath the distant horizon. He did our Savior a great service. He took the lifeless Body and laid it reverently in his own new tomb. His devotion to Christ was revealed in one beautiful act of courage and tenderness. Nevertheless, in Joseph we see the weakness of those who could do so much for Jesus, but who do so little and who do it so late.

Joseph, Matthew tells *us*, was a man of considerable wealth; no doubt a prosperous Jewish business man (Matthew 27:57) in the Judean town of Arimathea. He had a fine reputation, for Luke reminds us that he was “a good and upright man” (Luke 23:50). He had been elected to the Sanhedrin, the group of seventy men which formed the ruling council, the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation. To be a member of the Sanhedrin was the crowning honor which could be bestowed upon a Jewish layman. He had really “arrived”.

Now, being the type of man he was, it was natural that he should be interested in the

young Preacher from Galilee. Indeed, like iron filings to the magnet, he was drawn irresistibly to Jesus. Like the flower to the sun, he turned his face to Christ. In the crowds that stood spellbound as Jesus preached and healed the sick, there must often have been seen the pale and eager face of Joseph of Arimathea. And, the day came when he knew in his heart that Jesus was the Master he ought to follow and to Whom he ought to swear his allegiance. But day after day, and month after month, he put off the moment when he would make it known publicly that he was indeed a disciple of the Man from Galilee. He shrank from joining the fellowship of Christ's followers. Why? St. John tells us – he was “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews.”

There is another touch in the Gospel portrait that points to his weakness of character. Jesus, you remember, was captured in the Garden of Gethsemane about midnight on the Thursday. Almost at once messengers were sent to the homes of each of the seventy members of the Sanhedrin, summoning them to an immediate and all-important meeting of the Council in the middle of the night. It was, of course, quite illegal to call the Sanhedrin in this way, but that did not deter the ruthless High Priest, Caiaphas, who was moving heaven and earth to have the Prisoner condemned before morning light. And so, the Council met. St. Mark (14:64) says, concerning the trial before the Sanhedrin, “They all condemned Jesus as worthy of death.” St. Luke (23:51) says that Joseph “had not consented to their decision and action.” The obvious inference is that Joseph did not vote against the Sanhedrin's resolution, and yet did not consent to the death of Jesus for the simple reason that he did not attend the meeting! When, in the dead of night, the messenger came knocking on his door, summoning him to the conclave, he just didn't get up and go! He stayed in his warm bed. I suppose his wife murmured, “Don't go, Joseph, you'll only make your cold worse!” After all, it was illegal, thought Joseph, to convene the Council in the middle of the night. So, he turned over and went back to sleep. He would make some enquiries in the morning.

We hear little more about Joseph. No doubt he stood next morning on the slopes of Calvary and watched Jesus die. Later in the day he took his courage in his hand and went and begged Pilate to allow him to give the Body a decent burial. Perhaps Joseph bribed Pilate, and the governor could not resist the offer of the rich man's gold! No doubt Joseph was ashamed of himself for not attending the Council meeting when Jesus was condemned. “Oh my God, if only I had gone to the meeting and stood up and confessed Him as my Lord! At least I would have gone down with the band playing and the flag flying; and Jesus would have known that He had one friend left!”

So, he took with him Nicodemus, who had visited Jesus by night on one occasion (John 3), and who was also, perhaps, a secret disciple; and the two of them removed the Lord's body from the Cross and buried it in the new rock-hewn tomb which Joseph had prepared for his own last resting place. It helped to salve his burdened conscience. But even as he performed those last deeds of reverence and of love, he knew in his heart that he was doing too little too late.

We never hear his name again. They probably kicked him out of the Sanhedrin; but his name finds no place in the roster of the early Church.

There is, I believe, a message for us today from our study of Joseph. Let me set it down in the form of two beatitudes:

1. Blessed are they who are not ashamed of Jesus Christ.

D. L. Moody, the famous 19th century evangelist, as a young Christian, was once introduced to a Mr. Bewley of Dublin, Ireland, who said to the friend making the introduction, “Is this young man O and O?” The friend inquired, “What do you mean by O and O?” “I mean – Is he out and out for Christ?” replied Mr. Bewley.

Joseph of Arimathea was not O and O. As a respected citizen and an honored member of the Sanhedrin, he was a secret follower of Jesus. And that secrecy was tragic for Joseph. It meant that there was a hidden wound in his soul. As he heard Jesus preach and teach, his soul leaped to meet the truth. But when he sat in the meetings of the Sanhedrin, he nodded half-hearted assent as other members of the court expressed fear about “this young upstart, Jesus of Nazareth.” No person can live nobly with such a civil war raging in his soul.

I am convinced that if the cause of Christ is going to make a vital impact upon our generation, then professing Christians are going to have to make a far more courageous witness in the places where they live and work and have their social contacts. Too many of us are disciples, but secretly, for fear of someone – perhaps a friend who is not on our wavelength spiritually, or a working colleague who is of another faith, or maybe even a confirmed agnostic. Tell me – do the people who know you best know that you are a devoted follower of Christ? I cannot help but feel that in many an office or laboratory or factory or classroom, the Kingdom of God would be tremendously advanced and hastened if those, especially those in positions of leadership and responsibility, by some act or word would let it be definitely known that they are Christians and share meaningfully and unselfconsciously what Christ means to them, as opportunity presents itself.

Many a young person commits his or her life to Christ, unites with the Church, and goes out into life with high ideals, determined to live a clean, Christ-like life. But, many of the people that young person meets and mingles with at school or work, scorn our faith, and have low moral standards and often enjoy flaunting their immorality. There may be invitations to the young Christian to spend leisure time with ungodly people, in places which hold glamorous attraction and much temptation; and, of course, it is pleasant to be regarded as “a good sort”, and “a fine mixer” – so much nicer than to be thought “religious”, and called the names that hurt so much when you’re in your teens and early twenties. Often that young believer becomes “a secret disciple because of the other fellows on the varsity squad or the girl at the next desk who flaunts her sexual freedom or the “friend” who might sneer.

This is why older Christians who have had long experience of this “rough and tumble” world ought to be especially eager to witness for Christ and set a good example. Our young people today are as fine as those in any preceding generation, if they get an ounce of encouragement. And, if one sincere disciple of Jesus in an office hauls the flag to the top of the mast and lets it be known by the way he conducts himself that he stands for the highest Christian ideals, I believe that many a younger person in that office would fly to the colors and feel eternally grateful for the courage and the witness of one who was not ashamed of Jesus Christ. It is always a poor, cowardly morality that refuses to identify itself with the noblest and the best.

Let's face it, folks. The world can't stand us. In fact, they hate us and everything we stand for. Evangelical Christians are considered to be a bunch of "nuts" who insist on believing that there are ultimate standards of right and wrong, and who hold to a traditional Judeo-Christian value system. The Washington Post writes that we are "largely poor, uneducated and easy to command."

Suzanne Fields, writing in the Washington Times a couple of weeks ago, referred to Ellen Hopkins, an editor for Rolling Stone magazine, "the hip rock rag for adults who yearn to stay in touch with their younger selves"! Miss Hopkins apparently has made a feminist case for chastity, believe it or not! Writing in the New York Times she said, "Teaching abstinence for teenagers need not be a bad idea just because it's the province of right-wing crazies."

Suzanne Fields goes on to say, "That's a little like saying that teaching the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, self-discipline and self-reliance, need not be bad ideas just because these ideas are the province of Moses, Jesus, and their nutty followers"!

There are a great multitude of good Christian people, both young and old, in our country, but so many of them have the idea that they are not in a position to make their goodness count for a lot. For this reason, I would challenge everyone, but especially our young people today, to consider getting involved in the political process, so that your Christian witness may count in high places. We must, as concerned Christians, become active at the precinct level where the grass roots really make their impact upon national politics. Many more Christians should aspire to positions of responsibility in government and political life. Christianity will spread, not through public preaching and private influence only. It will spread its influence when Christian men and women take office in spheres where their words and ideals are listened to, where decisions are made that touch even unwilling lives so that legislation throughout the land provides room for Christian values to find expression and guards the life of our nation from the ravages of entrenched evil.

We are terribly, indeed frighteningly, in the hands of liberal politicians and a super-liberal media establishment that is completely off the wall. Mind you, we are ten thousand times better off than nondemocratic countries, but even here we are being committed to courses of action by politicians, only a small proportion of whom are more than nominally Christian. Granted, the Church's task is not to govern, but to make Christian disciples. Nevertheless, if our country is to maintain Christian standards, then those who see Christ's vision for the world must increasingly take a larger and more active part in government.

2. Blessed are those who do not try to make the best of both worlds.

There are, you know, church members in congregations across this country who, like Joseph of Arimathea, do try to make the best of both worlds. When they are in an environment of worldliness, they join in enthusiastically; but when they are around the church, you wouldn't know they were the same people! They are like the chameleon, that strange little animal which, for protective purposes, can change the color of its skin to blend in with the particular environment in which it finds itself. There is a "tall story" about a cruel man who once tried an

experiment with a chameleon. He placed the animal on a Scottish tartan, and the poor thing, in attempting to turn all those colors at once, exploded! But seriously, the tragedy about these people is, of course, that they never know true happiness, because they know the stand they ought to take and inwardly despise themselves because they don't take it. Because they are not wholeheartedly committed to Christ, their higher and lower natures are engaged in perpetual civil war which tears them apart. They are like the wretched man who, upon returning from a visit to Paris, said that he only wished he had spent a vacation there before he was converted! Someone is reported to have said that "being a Presbyterian does not keep you from sinning; it only keeps you from enjoying it! However distorted that remark may be, it is nevertheless true that the person who tries to make the best of both worlds never really enjoys either. He has looked into the eyes of Christ, and therefore, he can never be truly happy in wickedness, but he is not disciplined enough or sufficiently committed to Christ to find real joy in his Christian walk. Could you imagine a more miserable or unhappy person?

A thoughtful young man once asked his minister this question: "Can you be a disciple of Jesus without anyone knowing it?" The reply of the pastor was perfectly unambiguous. He said, "Whoever wants to be in partnership with Christ must write his name upon the signboard outside the Carpenter's shop."

Joseph of Arimathea had arranged his life so nicely. He had been so successful in the affairs of this world. He had been appointed to the Sanhedrin. He was a paragon of respectability. And then one day, out of a clear sky, his smugness and complacency vanished forever. He looked upon a Man hanging on a cross; and never again, so long as he lived, could Joseph ever forget that he had failed his Lord. He had been nothing better than a miserable "secret disciple". When the chips were down, he had not had the courage to stand up to be counted. He missed the two-fold blessedness; the blessedness of those who are not ashamed of Jesus; and the blessedness of those who do not seek to make the best of both worlds but are utterly and forever committed to Christ.

May we learn from the story of Joseph of Arimathea that nothing takes away fear and shame and guilt like committing ourselves without any reserve whatsoever to our Lord and Master. May we learn that nothing is so integrating to personality as to keep our eyes fixed upon Him, and to seek to do what pleases and glorifies Him. And, may we learn that nothing is so truly our own forever as that which, in glad and full surrender, we give to the One Who endured the Cross for us.

AMEN.