

Holy Saturday

31.03.2018
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Introduction

Holy Saturday is the day between. Jesus has been crucified and is dead. What now?

Practical tasks are to be done – arrange the burial, find a tomb, embalm the body. The practical tasks provide a brief distraction from emotional turmoil for two of Jesus disciples, Joseph of Aramathea and Nicodemus.

But after the enormity of what has happened on Friday, the betrayal, the injustice of the trial, the extreme violence of the execution of one you not only knew but loved, (how could it yet be ‘Good’ Friday) there is terror mixed with numbed confusion and a consuming sense of failure. Is this the end? The end of a promise of a new future? The end of hope?

For Jesus disciples, trauma pervades Holy Saturday.

Text

John 19:38–42

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Comment

Two characters come into the open air in today’s reading: Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

Both have been secret disciples. But on this Holy Saturday they are centre stage.

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in other Gospels as “a rich man and a disciple of Jesus” (Matthew 27.57); ‘a respected member of the council (Sanhedrin), who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God’ (Mark 15.43) and St Luke adds that Joseph had ‘not consented to (the Council’s) decision and action’ to demand the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 23.50–56)

Nicodemus is mentioned three times in John’s Gospel. He came to Jesus ‘by night’ acknowledging that Jesus was “a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (John 3.2).

The second mention is when the Pharisees were seeking to arrest Jesus he protests that Jesus should be given a chance to defend himself. Nicodemus says “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” (John 7.50–51)

And in today’s reading he brings spices – expensive spices that would typically be used for royalty – and together, Joseph and Nicodemus prepare the body and place it in the tomb.

Here were two men who belonged to that part of the contemporary Jewish religious and social system that was most criticised by Jesus and was fiercely opposed to everything Jesus stood for.

Yet these two were secret disciples of Jesus

Both Joseph and Nicodemus were caught between their group, as defined by their social status, religious calling, educational qualifications, work colleagues, and their curiosity about this young Rabbi Jesus who, they recognised, had a ring of truth about him. For them, Jesus was an important messenger from God – but that was something that was better kept quiet. Until now!

They had been dismayed at the growing antagonism of their colleagues towards Jesus. They could hardly believe how things had come about – the spiral of violence grew deeper and deeper, until the crowds were shouting “Crucify.”

And now it was too late. Their attempts to persuade their colleagues to see reason and open their minds to what Jesus was about had failed. Now there was work to be done. Jesus, the person they respected, admired and secretly followed, could not be left on the cross to be wasted by the natural elements. If he had suffered an unjust trial and was an innocent victim of a tortuous crucifixion, the least he could do was have a decent burial.

First, they had to risk asking for the removal of the body. That request would declare to the world they were disciples of Jesus, their secrecy would no longer protect them. But for Joseph and Nicodemus, this was a moment of truth, they could not sit on the fence.

Having decided to make a stand, things became much clearer for them. Now they could express their devotion to Jesus not just by what they said, but what they were about to do. Jesus was deserved more than a decent burial, but a burial worthy of a King, with all the appropriate religious rituals carefully and lovingly observed.

So they embalmed Jesus body and laid his body in the tomb.

Response

1. Holy Saturday is a quiet day. A day to take in the enormity of the events of Good Friday. How will you spend today?

2. Looking back to Friday charged with negative emotions from the betrayal by a friend, the desertion by closest followers, the anger of the crowd, the skulduggery of political and religious leaders, the barbaric violence of death by crucifixion. How do you deal with negative emotions? How do you respond as you engage again with events of Good Friday? In the space of Holy Saturday, is there an insight to be gained?

Has there been a time when you have discovered, in a new way, what being a disciple of Jesus means? What was that time? Why did it happen? What was the result

Prayer

Thanks be to you, our Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have given us,
for all the pains and insults which you have borne for us.

Most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may we know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day.

Amen.

Richard, Bishop of Chichester 1253
