

## ***Courage and Compassion***

John 19:38-42

Holy Saturday, March 22, 2008

### **I.**

Today we remember a crucial event in the life of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a wealthy Jew, a member of the Sanhedrin, and was not likely to be a hero on the day Jesus died.

Our Gospel reading shows, however, that he was a man whose courage stands in stark contrast to the actions of his fellow Sanhedrin members. Joseph took Jesus off the cross. His colleagues, however, played a significant role in placing him on the cross.

And the Sanhedrin, we remember, was the group of Jewish judges and leaders that made up the governing body of Jews in Jerusalem. They were the ones to whom Jesus was taken after his arrest in the garden, and there he endured a phony trial based on trumped-up charges so he could be handed over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

### **II.**

Joseph was an obscure fellow in terms of the Bible, and is mentioned only once. But his story is in all four Gospels, and he's there for one decent act that took incredible courage when he claimed the body of Jesus from the cross, took it down, wrapped it in linens, and placed it in a tomb that Joseph had prepared for himself.

This took courage because it publicly placed Joseph in opposition to his colleagues in the Sanhedrin. They condemned Jesus. Joseph honored him. And Joseph's social standing and position in the Jewish community could have been jeopardized in the process.

He also ran the risk of Pilate's wrath because Pilate already was troubled and irritated by this whole business, and Joseph's request, for all he knew, could have been the last straw, so to speak. Joseph could have been placed in physical danger if Pilate had reacted badly.

In addition, Roman tradition was that crucified criminals were not buried, but rather were left to the dogs and vultures. Joseph had no idea what Pilate might say to this unusual request for Jesus' body.

### **III.**

This brief story of Joseph's courage is extremely important. Often we just skip right over it in our hurry to get from the crucifixion to the resurrection. But a proper burial for Jesus has theological significance for two reasons.

First, Jesus died on a Friday afternoon, and the Jewish Sabbath was approaching in a matter of hours. It would have been a desecration of Jewish law and tradition for Jesus to have remained on the cross. Joseph's actions enabled the glory of the resurrection to become manifest in a holy setting.

Second, because Jesus' resurrection is the basis for our own sure and certain hope of eternal life, we see his burial as a prophetic example of the compassion and care for which we hope at the end of our own lives.

### **IV.**

This story of Joseph and his courage speaks to us today. We live in an increasingly secular world where faith is being driven from the public forum, where political correctness has

become an idol that many worship, and where truth is nothing more than what some people think works for them.

Many people today view religion as a consumer item that can be purchased or left on the shelf. They buy into what feels good, and disregard that which calls them to account for their choices.

The courage to speak and live our faith in public and visible ways has never been more important. And it does not come naturally. We often have to force ourselves to do it. I'm sure that if left to his own devices Joseph would say that his actions did not come naturally. But he was moved by the Spirit to do what had to be done.

Many of us have family, friends, and colleagues who do not share our understanding of Christian life, and whose unwillingness to see or accept the Gospel promise concerns us. And we can be tempted, by our own desire to preserve a relationship with them in this world, to put aside the crucial message of life in the next world.

How many of us have been in situations where we had a perfect opportunity to speak of our faith, but we didn't do so because we were self-conscious, or did not want to offend anyone? And how tragic are those situations where we are haunted because we never spoke, and the opportunity now is gone forever?

One of the commitments of our Baptismal covenant is to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ." Sometimes this is not easy to do. I'm sure that Joseph gave some thought to his heroic action before he did anything. But he did it, and that's what counts.

## V.

Joseph of Arimathea left no doubt where he stood given the situation facing him. I pray that we can say the same. Just as Joseph reached out to Jesus, we also are called to do so on behalf of Jesus.

And although inviting people to church probably will not be regarded in history as equivalent to taking Jesus off the cross, the courage to do either springs from the same concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ. If we take Joseph as an example we will be blessed, and we can bring God's blessing to others. *Amen.*