

Easter Eve: Saturday April 3rd: Joseph of Arimathea: [Luke 23:50-56](#):

'...he asked for Jesus' body'



*Ancient tombs,
Church of the Holy
Sepulchre, Jerusalem*

When I was training for ordained ministry I was involved in a series of three assemblies at a local school. We decided to imagine that there had been television news broadcasts in Palestine at the time of Jesus (about 1900 years before the first actual broadcast!) complete with a newsreader and a reporter who interviewed further members of our team dressed as characters in the story. The first assembly focused on the Friday of Jesus' crucifixion, the second on the Saturday after the crucifixion and the third on the Sunday Jesus rose from the dead. For the Saturday report one of the team came on stage completely covered in blankets. He was acting the part of one of Jesus's disciples who had gone into hiding and he told the reporter how all his hopes and dreams had

been shattered and he was now frightened for his life. For the third assembly the same team member, minus the blankets and in ordinary clothes, testified to the complete transformation that had taken place because Jesus was alive again. The point of the assemblies was to get across the profound change in mood which took place between the Friday and Sunday of Holy Week making sure not to leave the Saturday out. We enjoyed doing the assemblies and I hope the school students liked them too!

We sometimes don't give much thought to the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday but today's reading reminds us just how traumatic the Sabbath between Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection actually was. There were no more hopes and dreams for his friends and followers; just the despair of seeing, as they thought, everything they had built those hopes and dreams on crumble before their eyes. It must have been an unbearable day.

Joseph of Arimathea shared the grief of Jesus' followers. He was a member of the Jewish Council who was 'waiting for the kingdom of God' (v 51). Right at the beginning of his life, the infant Jesus met Simeon, someone else who was waiting (Luke 2 v 25), meaning that Jesus' life was bookended by encounters with people living expectantly. Joseph was a member of the establishment to his fingertips and yet had publicly disagreed with the actions of his colleagues in condemning Jesus at his trial. He would certainly have raised the suspicions of his colleagues that he was some kind of fifth columnist.

So to go to Pilate and ask for Jesus' body, once again publicly identifying himself with Jesus, was very risky indeed. In Mark's account of his request he adds that he went boldly (literally 'taking courage' - Mark 15 v 43). It's as if he thought through the possible consequences, took a deep breath and asked to see Pilate. The bravery and devotion of this man with a lot to lose is an inspiration. Just as rough and unfeeling hands nailed Jesus to his cross, so loving hands take him down, wrap his body and place him in his tomb (v 53). Because of the rocky terrain it was not possible to bury bodies under the ground. Instead bodies were placed in caves or, as in the case of Jesus, a specially constructed tomb that had been cut

out of the rock (v 53). These were often large enough to accommodate a number of bodies hence Luke's note that Jesus' was the first body to be buried there (v 53). Having placed him in his tomb Joseph then rolls the stone across the door of the tomb (Mark 15 v 46). It was an extremely big stone and even though we know from John's account that Nicodemus was there to help (John 19 v 39), extra hands would certainly have been needed.

Joseph, whether he is aware of it or not, is being followed. The Galilean women who are keeping tabs on him had been with Jesus since the beginning (v 55). They too are brave and devoted and having noted which tomb Joseph had placed Jesus in, they go to prepare spices to anoint his body (v 56). It's important to keep in mind that Joseph and the women were preparing his body for burial rather than resurrection (v 55-56). There would have been many tears as they watched Joseph perform his melancholy duty. Whereas they once had a teacher who was more alive than anyone else they had ever met, all they had now was a body. Even though we know how the story ends, we share the profound sadness. And the Sabbath was about to begin.

I was once present at the Western Wall in Jerusalem for the eve of Sabbath celebrations. The enormous crowds and scenes of celebration were quite extraordinary. There was singing, cheering and dancing and the exhilarating party atmosphere was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. The fact that the best day of the week, the day when there was no work giving everyone a chance to rest and celebrate, was about to begin throws the despair of Joseph, the women from Galilee and the frightened hiding disciples into stark relief. They were not even able to busy themselves to take their minds off the numbing sense of grief; all they could do, pretty much literally, was to sit there.

There are times in all our lives when we grieve the loss of a loved one or when something we massively hoped for didn't happen. Both of these elements combined in the mind of Joseph as he finished the task of burying Jesus just before the Sabbath. We all know disappointment and loss at times and they are hard to take and difficult to think and work through. As we sit next to Joseph on this particular Sabbath we might hear him talking about Jesus and the hope he had placed in him, we may hear him weeping and there may well be long periods of silence. There was that one Sabbath day's experience of the death of Jesus without the knowledge of his resurrection, and it was hard to take.

We, of course, were not there to meet with the risen Lord, and when we suffer the loss of a loved one there will be no return on the third day. The experience of Joseph and all Jesus' other friends on the Saturday is therefore closer to our own experiences of loss. The advantage we have over them at this point in the story is that we can put our trust in the risen Lord and take comfort in entrusting our loved one into his everlasting arms. This doesn't take away the tears and the pain of loss or suddenly make it alright. But it means that we have a hope that God's love is stronger than death. Joseph has placed Jesus' body in the tomb and rolled an extremely big stone across it. That, it seemed, was that. But Sunday is coming!

Questions: How was Joseph able to show such courage? What difference do you think being a Christian makes at a time of loss?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as you lay in your tomb, your friends loved you even as they believed they had lost you. Thank you that you did not stay in the tomb! Amen.