

SECRET BELIEVERS

Our sermon for Good Friday evening is taken from our inspired readings. Hear again the Word of the Lord.

Then, after these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being (a) disciple of Jesus, but have been concealed on account of the fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might have lifted up the Body of Jesus; and Pilate permitted (it). He came, then, and lifted up the Body of Him.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

The words of this evening's text that were just repeated are significant. That is because they reveal that people who come to the Faith in Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of their sins may do so to their own earthly peril. In late 20th century — early 21st century A.D. mission terms, such people would be classed as C-5 or C-6 converts to Christianity. We will get to defining those terms soon.

Even so, I know the Holy Spirit moved you to attend this service this evening that you might hear of Jesus' sin-covering death, and you will. However, the same Spirit moved the keys of a particular Mac to compose this sermon. It was done to open your hearts to a continually existing biblical reality. Such occurs among those who have heard the pure Word of God, and yet do not live in societies that permit, or at least tolerate, if not openly uphold, a person's right to confess Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of his or her sins without an imminent reality of punishment or death.

Mission terms were given a bit earlier, C-5 and C-5. (Humans label things and people. Rightly done, that is simply exercising part of the gift of naming that God gave to Adam in the Garden of Eden). A person in classified as a C-5 believer in Christ retains legal and social identity within the predominant non-Christian religious community in which he or she lives. Such a person does reject any of those non-Christian religious practices or teachings that contradict that recorded in the Bible. C-5

¹ *John* 19:38

believers may be found sharing their faith in Jesus. Even so, they continue to identify themselves in terms of the majority religion in their area. With that initial classification in mind, hear again our emphasis text for this night:

Then, after these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being (a) disciple of Jesus, but have been concealed on account of the fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might have lifted up the Body of Jesus; and Pilate permitted (it). He came, then, and lifted up the Body of Him.²

A man such as Joseph of Arimathea could be placed into our contemporary C-5 mission classification. That is because he would have been considered a little unorthodox to the majority of the Jews in Arimathea, Jeursalem, Judah – that which passed for Israel in the first century A.D. He was known as a man right with God (Lk 23:50ff); a good man (ibid.); a wealthy man (Mt 27:57ff); a ruler of the people (Mk 15:42ff).

Joseph fits into the description of a C-5 believer in Jesus because he has been revealed to be one who had opposed the plans of the Great Sanhedrin. These were 70 men, led by the Jewish High Priest, who were the elders and the leaders of the Jewish people. Joseph of Arimathea had stood against them when their plans turned to effecting betrayal and killing of Jesus. All of that you may review in the four parallel Gospel accounts of the events that immediately followed Jesus' death in the sins of the whole world, Joseph's sins, your sins. Hear again tonight's theme text:

Then, after these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being (a) disciple of Jesus, but have been concealed on account of the fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might have lifted up the Body of Jesus; and Pilate permitted (it). He came, then, and lifted up the Body of Him.³

Until the early evening in which he had asked to lift up Jesus' Body from the cross, Joseph of Arimathea may have been not what mission folks call a C-5 (kind of a "Completed Jew"), but a C-6 believer. If he were placed into that classification, it

² John 19:38

³ John 19:38

would mean that he would have kept his Faith in Jesus secret by not sharing his belief. (Our text indicates he was a clandestine confessor of Jesus the Christ). He certainly could be placed under the other distinguishers of that category – he was under imminent threat of persecution, of suffering or of legal retaliation. Though he opposed the council’s decision concerning the disposition of Jesus, we have no record that he shared his faith openly as the reason he voiced his opposition to their plans.

To the average Jew of his day and locale, Joseph of Arimathea would have looked, acted, dressed, worshipped and conducted his life just as they all did. He would have been seen complying with the Law of God and the regulations of the Pharisees or Sadducees concerning right religious practices in their era. The dispersed band of Jesus’ pre-crucifixion disciples would likely not have recognized him as being one of them (there is no mention of him before the Good Friday texts).

That would have been the case until he went to the governor and asked for the Body of Jesus. None of the other open disciples of Jesus – not even Peter, James and John had stepped up to do the right thing with Jesus’ mortal remains. The women stood by in sorrow.

From the Scriptures, we learn that Joseph’s role on Good Friday was critical to the fulfillment of Old Covenant prophecy. The Old Testament texts were very specific as to what the faithful were to do with the body of any man who committed a sin worthy of death under God’s revealed Law. In particular, it is recorded that if such a man were to be hung on a tree, *his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree.*⁴ Anyone hanged on a tree in the midst of Israel was considered by God and the faithful to have been accursed. The bodies of such persons were to be buried the same day they die. The Word of God indicates that is so that the Promised Land many not have become defiled. God’s ending words in His command concerning those hung on trees were to remind the people that He had given them that land as an inheritance. Tonight, you

⁴ Deuteronomy 21:22.

are free to consider that Joseph's words and actions displayed that he was a true man of God as he followed the Law of God which lies behind that which we hear repeated:

Then, after these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being (a) disciple of Jesus, but have been concealed on account of the fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might have lifted up the Body of Jesus; and Pilate permitted (it). He came, then, and lifted up the Body of Him.⁵

That record, without the testimony that Joseph was a clandestine believer in Jesus as the Christ, still would reveal him to be a righteous man under the Law. Even so, Joseph of Arimathea's words and actions also stand as an eternal witness. They are given for the Church to remember, in every generation, God's grace in His Word.

We are to keep in mind today that there may be those who hear of Jesus through the proclamation of His atoning death and come to saving faith in Him. Yet, they may keep their belief secret on account of imminent threats to their bodies, families, livelihoods, reputations and so forth. In certain places, in particular circumstances, to be open about one's belief in Jesus as Savior and Lord can still bring about serious consequences.

Think about the charges the unbelieving Jews leveled against Jesus. Among them were their words to Pilate, *We, Law we have, and according to the Law He owes (a) debt to die, because Son of God Himself He made!*⁶ The Law of God to which they referred still proclaims:

The one who blasphemes the Name of the Lord shall surely be put to death, all the congregation shall surely stone him...⁷

As you have heard, the religious majority complaint on that Good Friday had served to work to move Pilate. Its end was that Jesus had been executed. Consider Joseph of Arimathea's predicament as a secret believer. What might the same crowds do to those who revealed they believed in Jesus as the Christ of God?

⁵ John 19:38

⁶ John 19:7

⁷ Leviticus 24:16a

What do you think they do to converts to Christianity today in countries under Sharia Law, or in communities increasingly subject to true Islamic believers, as is found in the Netherlands? In 2005, this congregation experienced the strong concern, and need for prayers, as a young Muslim man came to faith in Jesus in Iraq. You were asked to pray that his family would hear the Word he believed and be saved as he was. That which had been secret for a few days was about to become public. We had a genuine concern that would be killed for his confession of Jesus as Lord.

He was not. In fact, 12 years later he is numbered among our members. He lives in our city. He has been God's instrument to bring the saving news of Jesus' sin-covering death to others trapped in submission to a capricious and false god.

That is nice. It is part of the history of this congregation. But what is God doing among us now?

He has already, during this Lent, brought an LCMS missionary among us. The work of the Donofrios will enable the Good News of Jesus to be proclaimed – via electronic media – into places where converts to Christianity are punished and killed. The media technology which they bring into the mission field will allow the Word to go forth, according to God's will, to continue to create C-5 and C-6 believers. I thank God many of you signed up for their newsletter, and pray that those who are financially able, have begun to support them.

Who knows where a contemporary man of courageous faith such as Joseph of Arimathea might be raised up for action at the right and proper time? Those people are not likely to know themselves. Do you think that Joseph went to bed on the Sunday of Jesus' triumphal entrance thinking that he would have to go to the hated Romans and request that the Body of Jesus be given a proper burial so that God's Promised Land might be clean again? Think of your answer as you hear tonight's emphasis text again:

Then, after these things, Joseph of Arimathea, being (a) disciple of Jesus, but have been concealed on account of the fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might

*have lifted up the Body of Jesus; and Pilate permitted (it). He came, then, and lifted up the Body of Him.*⁸

Does God continue to make secret believers now, as He did with Joseph of Arimathea, those whom He will reveal for their use of the Faith in trying times? Most certainly. The news of the death of Jesus moves many people – to disbelief, misbelief and unbelief. Even so, the news of the death of Jesus for sinners, for particular sinners – even those who are considered good and right among their fellow humans – the good news of the death of Jesus moves some people to true belief. That Faith in the Christ of the Scriptures then works the faithful to produce good according to God’s will, in His ways, even if the faithful remain secret believers for a time.

If those who hold the Faith concealed can be moved by the Good News to act when it is needed, what may it do to, for and through you whose Faith has been revealed? The death of Jesus, in the lives of the faithful, continues to produce the good He wills. This comes to you through the release of your sins. The proclamation of the Good News of Jesus’ death prepares you to hear that you continue to be declared right with God. The Good of Jesus’ Friday death and burial is declared to move you to live lives that touch so many other people with the rightly divided Word of God. He who gave faith’s true courage to Joseph of Arimathea will give it to you when God determines it is needed.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Good Friday Tenebrae Vespers

Psalm 31; Psalm 2; Psalm 27; Psalm 31; John 19:1-42

April 14, 2017

Paster Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

⁸ *John 19:38*