

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 88”**

*Matthew 27:57-66*

This is where the story should end, where any normal story would end. Jesus has lived his life; he has faced the consequences of his clashes with authority and tradition; he has been tried, punished and executed; and he is now laid to rest in a grave. It's all over. What more could there be? Well, there is another chapter and we'll look at that when we get to it, but for those who had followed Jesus, those who had been his friends and disciples, this is effectively it. And in the words we've just heard, we see a couple more responses to Jesus and his death.

Over the past couple of sermons, we've seen how various people have responded to Jesus. We've seen Judas' betrayal of him. We've seen Peter's denial of him. We've seen Pilate's attempt to evade any responsibility for him. Then there was the mocking response of the soldiers in the Praetorium and the abandonment of Jesus by the disciples. And after his dying breath we noted the acknowledgment of him by the guards at the cross. Finally, this week, we see how Joseph of Arimathea and the Chief Priests and Elders responded to his death.

The burial of Jesus is reported by all four gospel writers and it is important for them that they do state clearly that Jesus had died and was buried. All of them will go on to describe the resurrection and for that to have any impact at all, it's vital that we know Jesus had actually died. There have been all kinds of attempts over the centuries to explain away Jesus' resurrection, many of them by finding ways around his death and saying that he didn't really die. But it is very difficult to explain away the weight of evidence and Matthew here is very insistent on what happened after Jesus' body was taken down from the cross. If you want to read a bit more deeply about this, try either *Who Moved The Stone?* by Frank Morison (who set out to disprove the resurrection, but ended up believing it), or *Easter Enigma* by John Wenham.

So here we meet Joseph of Arimathea, a character about whom we actually know very little, but around whom a huge mythology has grown up, including visits to England (to Glastonbury), miraculous happenings and even a blood relationship with Jesus (some think he may have been his uncle). All we know for sure from what Matthew says is that Joseph was from a village in the hill country of Ephraim, about 20 miles north-west of Jerusalem, that he had become a disciple of Jesus (albeit secretly, according to John) and that he was rich. Mark and Luke also tell us that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews, but that he had not supported them in their decisions about Jesus.

His wealth meant that he had a private tomb close to Jerusalem and the tomb had not yet been used. These tombs were hewn out of the rock and had shelves cut in them where bodies were laid, not in coffins but embalmed and wrapped in shrouds with spices and other aromatic agents. They would be left there to

decompose and then the bones would be put into an ossuary for long-term storage. It was very generous of Joseph to offer his tomb, particularly as a tomb which had had the body of an executed criminal in could not be used ever again, according the Jewish law. And that generosity extended to the provision of a shroud and all the other things that would be needed for a decent burial.

And it was a decent burial compared with what would usually have happened. Usually the victims of crucifixion were left on the cross to decompose and for the carrion birds to peck away the flesh. Whatever was left would simply have been thrown on the rubbish tip. Because of the timing of Jesus' execution – just before the Sabbath – the body could not be left to hang there over the holy day, so it needed to be removed and Joseph showed considerable boldness in going to Pilate – who would probably not have been terribly well disposed towards members of the Sanhedrin after the trouble he'd had with them the day before – and requesting the body of Jesus in order to give him a respectable burial. He'd have had some servants with him to help, no doubt, and the body, quickly prepared for burial was wrapped in a new linen shroud and placed carefully on a shelf in the tomb. The stone would have been a large one which was in a channel in front of the entrance which sloped down, so it was easy to roll it down and close, but very difficult indeed to roll back up again.

That was it. All over. Joseph, the secret disciple, has now, as it were, come out. Not only his refusal to go along with the Sanhedrin's decision to deal with Jesus, but also his courageous visit to Pilate now marked him out as a sympathiser with this Messiah figure. He could no longer keep his faith in Jesus from being seen.

But he wasn't the only one to approach Pilate after the death of Jesus. Joseph went along "*as evening approached*" on Friday – in other words, just before the Sabbath started and all the regulations about what you could and couldn't do kicked in. He was anxious to stick to the letter of the law. But the next day – as Matthew puts it rather clumsily, "*the one after Preparation Day*" – on the Sabbath itself, the Chief Priests and the Pharisees, went to Pilate. In so doing they were themselves breaking the Sabbath. Such visits were very much out of order on the Sabbath, so these so-called guardians of the law and upholders of Jewish tradition were actually going against their own rules in order to further their anti-Jesus agenda here.

As they address the Roman Governor, they are still defaming Jesus. Their mission is very different from Joseph's. They call him "*that deceiver*" and talk about a potential deception. They are anxious about the possibilities now that Jesus is dead and, curiously, seem to have remembered Jesus' words better than his own disciples did. They remember his saying that he'd rise again after three days and they want to ensure not that he doesn't rise again, but that his disciples don't make it look as if he did. The stone would have

been very difficult to roll away from the entrance, but not impossible – after all, the bones had to be removed at some point and there had to be access to put other bodies in. So they request that the tomb “*be made secure until the third day*”. Pilate tells them to go off with a guard – it’s not clear from the Greek whether he is sending them off with their own Temple Guard or whether he’s offering them some of his men – and the tomb is sealed, probably with ropes and a wax or tar seal (a bit like they put on drains and manhole covers when they’ve been checked prior to a royal visit).

These are the sworn enemies of Jesus, but the irony is that they are the ones who take most seriously his words about resurrection. It’s not, as we’ve said, that they necessarily believe he will come back to life, but they are worried about what effect all this will have on his followers. As it seems that the disciples are so stunned by what has happened that they have forgotten all about Jesus’ talk of coming back to life, the precautions made by the Jewish leaders are probably not needed. The disciples are not going to try and get into the tomb. But whatever precautions they put in place, however strong the seal, however vigilant the guards, nothing is going to stop Jesus getting out. There is nothing that can be done by human endeavour that will prevent the purposes of God being fulfilled.

So here we have a description of the burial of Jesus that sets everything up nicely for what is about to happen. Matthew, like the other gospel writers, has described very clearly the death and burial of Jesus and assembled a crowd of witnesses – both pro- and anti-Jesus – so that the cataclysmic events of the third day cannot be denied or explained away. Everything is in place for the most astonishing moment in human history.

And what we notice once again is the various responses to Jesus – to who he is, to what he has said, to what he has done. Once again we find ringing in our ears the desperate question posed by Pilate back in the Praetorium, in v22: “*What, then, shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?*” That’s the question that rings down through the centuries to us today. That’s the question that we all have to answer at some point. That’s the question upon whose answer hangs our eternal future. Are you, like Joseph, prepared to come out and identify yourself with the followers of Jesus, as someone who takes seriously all that he has said and who wants to throw in your lot with him? Or are you more like the Jewish leaders here, who have heard and remembered the words of Jesus, but want to ensure that they have no effect on your life – nor, if you can help it, on the lives of others? The question can be answered only by you. You’ve got a couple more sermons on Matthew’s Gospel to help you make up your mind if you haven’t already done so – and if you haven’t, then think very carefully about what your response will be.

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Once again we find ringing in our ears the desperate question posed by Pilate back in the Praetorium, in v22: "*What, then, shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?*" Are you, like Joseph, prepared to come out and identify yourself with the followers of Jesus, as someone who takes seriously all that he has said and who wants to throw in your lot with him? Or are you more like the Jewish leaders here, who have heard and remembered the words of Jesus, but want to ensure that they have no effect on your life – nor, if you can help it, on the lives of others? The question can be answered only by you.

### **Questions for discussion**

- 1) What do you think about legends that Joseph of Arimathea visited England? Does it make any difference?
- 2) Does God honour secret disciples? Why/why not?
- 3) The Jewish leaders had heard Jesus' words but chose to ignore them. How does that happen today? How can we encourage people to take Jesus' words seriously?
- 4) Are we prepared to confront people with the question Pilate asked? Do you agree that it is a vital question? Do you think we should be more forthright in our evangelism? Why/why not?

- 5) Look back over chapter 27. Have you gained any new insights into the trial and death of Jesus through these studies? What has particularly struck you about this story?