

Week 10: “After these things”

The current series ends with the story of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus caring for Jesus after his death. This story, contained in John’s gospel, begins with the words, “*After these things.*” After Jesus’ suffering and cross – *after these things* – a new chapter was opened on the way of following Jesus. The story of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus reveals how the Holy Spirit was already at work in the hearts of Jesus’ friends encouraging them to act boldly.

In John’s gospel this story begins with the verse, “*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*” (Jn. 19:38). Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in the four gospels as the person who went to Pilate seeking permission to remove Jesus’ body from the cross. Luke’s gospel states that Joseph, “*though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action*” (Lk. 23:50-51a). Through Luke we learn that the decision of the Sanhedrin to crucify Jesus was perhaps not unanimous. This reveals that even though Jesus’ disciples had gone into hiding, other supporters of Jesus began to act with faith and trust in God’s promise.

After Joseph’s request to Pilate, John continues, “*Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.*” (Jn. 19:39). Nicodemus was a Pharisee and ruler (*archon*), which also made him a member of the Sanhedrin. In addition to being a powerful man, Nicodemus must have also been wealthy for he brought with him a remarkable amount of spices to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Jesus, crucified as a criminal, would be buried as a king.

Obviously, these two men knew one another and perhaps had also been eyewitnesses to the crucifixion. Jesus had told Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom he must be “*born from above.*” Perhaps his conversation with Jesus about God’s love for the world and eternal life had remained alive in his heart, because along with Joseph, he lived out Jesus’ words, “*But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*” (Jn. 3: 21).



After Jesus’ death, two men, Joseph and Nicodemus came into the light acting with clarity in God’s unfolding salvation story. They fulfilled Isaiah’s words about the Suffering Servant, “*They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth*” (Isa. 53:9). Death did not end the story of Jesus’ life, rather the cross began a new chapter, driving out fear and preparing the way for the resurrection.

The first image this week (to the left) is a 12th century glass mosaic of the *Descent from the Cross* from Monreale Cathedral in Palermo, Sicily. The mosaic depicts Joseph of Arimathea holding Christ’s

body, while presumably Nicodemus removes the nails driven into Christ's feet. The image shows two members of the Sanhedrin caring in death for a man who had invited them to live in a new way. They cared for Jesus in death not yet being able to see the resurrection. Their boldness helps us as we, too, walk by faith not being able to fully see the kingdom, but trusting in the promise of eternal life.

At the cross we meet a God who is hidden and revealed in suffering. At the cross we meet the God who suffers for all people – the *Salvator Mundi* – the Savior of the World. Jesus was crucified as the King of the Jews, and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus treated Jesus as a king. They anticipated the kingship of Christ echoed in Psalm 93:1, “*The Lord is king, robed in majesty.*”

This series ends as we anticipate the end of the church year and Christ the King Sunday. In the epistle reading for Christ the King Sunday, John writes, “*To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*” (Rev. 1:5b-6). During this series we have sought to meditate on the way of the



cross that Jesus invites each of us to travel upon. The way of the cross is not simply a once a year Lenten devotional theme; it is the daily Christian journey fulfilled over a lifetime. Daily, we respond to Jesus' invitation to follow him alone by denying and abandoning the self that gets in the way of Christ and of serving our neighbor.

The marble *Christus Victor* (to the left) on the front of St. Mark's depicts Christ the King, bearing the marks of the cross on his hands and feet, yet victorious over death. He is clothed as the high priest who makes us into a kingdom of priests – a priesthood of all believers – seeking to serve him and our neighbor in this world.

In *Christus Victor*, Christ hidden in suffering is revealed in resurrection as Prophet, Priest and King. An Alpha and Omega, the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet appear on his chasuble reminding us of the words from Revelation, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega,*” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev.1:8). Christ the King is the same yesterday, today and forever. Here, Christ is revealed in the shape of the cross, hands outstretched to bless and welcome the world.

The words, “*After these things,*” suggest that after receiving the things of God, after receiving grace that has moved us time and time again from life's darkest valleys to moments of resurrection, we are invited each day to open our arms and hands by living generously as Christ's body, the church, in service to others and to the world.

This series has sought to explore the way of the cross not simply a something depicted in art, but as the very heart of the Christian journey of following Jesus who comes with grace to a sinful and suffering humanity. We follow Christ knowing that he will always lead us to new life, while anticipating that he will also challenge us, and our culture of self-gratification, with an invitation to walk in a different direction from the world, the way of grace and blessing in self-sacrifice for others. In Christ Jesus we see God's love revealed as a king who blesses, forgives and suffers with the entire world. Follow him; he will free you each day to live for others. Amen.