

April 20, 2003
Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Because our Lord could hardly rise from the grave unless He had been buried, an explicit insistence on His burial is found in the Church's earliest proclamation. Paul himself, who knew its importance from the earlier tradition (1 Corinthians 15:4), included it in his own preaching (Acts 13:29) and writing (Romans 6:4). All the canonical gospels, moreover, agree that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin.

Joseph himself is variously portrayed by the four inspired writers. Mark (15:43) and Luke (23:51) describe him as someone who "waited for the kingdom of God," an expression which, taken without context, might indicate no more than that Joseph was a devout Jew. (I will argue presently that it does mean more.) Luke adds that Joseph, though a member of the Sanhedrin, had not consented to its plot against Jesus. Matthew (27:57) and John (18:38) are more explicit about Joseph's faith, both of them calling him a "disciple"-that is, a Christian-though John observes that he was so "secretly, for fear of the Jews."

In their slightly differing descriptions, the evangelists may have been portraying Joseph of Arimathea at somewhat different stages of his "spiritual pilgrimage," to use the customary expression. If this is the case, then it appears that the death of Jesus, the very hour of His apparent failure and defeat, was the occasion Joseph chose for getting really serious in his commitment, going public about his Christian discipleship. He approached Pontius Pilate-"boldly," says Mark-and asked for the body of Jesus.

This Joseph, precisely because he "waited for the kingdom of God," had intended to be buried, not in

Ramathaim, his native village, but in Jerusalem itself. The grand prophecies of messianic restoration, after all, especially those of Ezekiel and Zechariah, were centered in Jerusalem. Accordingly, in the holy city Joseph had purchased for himself a special burial vault that was situated, says John (18:41-42), in a garden not far from where Jesus had died. According to Matthew and Mark this tomb was carved out of solid rock. Luke and John both mention that it was brand new.

This elaborate burial arrangement suggests that Joseph of Arimathea was a man of some means. Indeed, Matthew (27:57) explicitly records that he was rich. This detail is, furthermore, of theological significance, because God's Suffering Servant, according to prophecy, was to be buried "with the rich" (Isaiah 53:9).

Luke features certain parallels between the account of Joseph of Arimathea and the infancy narrative, near both ends of his gospel. First, of course, a Joseph is prominent in each story. Second, in each account the naked, helpless body of Jesus is decently wrapped (2:7,12; 23:53). Third, Luke's portrayal of Joseph of Arimathea is strikingly similar to his description of Simeon, who welcomed the newborn Jesus on His first visit to the temple (2:25). Thus, both stories begin with "and behold" (*kai idou*). Each man is introduced with the expression "by the name of." Both men are called "righteous" (*dikaios*), and both are said to be "waiting." Simeon is "waiting for the Consolation of Israel," and Joseph is "waiting for the Kingdom of God." This complex set of parallels establishes a marked literary inclusion in the Lukan structure.

In all of the gospels, Joseph's actions are contrasted with those of the other members of the Sanhedrin. Whereas they blindfolded, mocked, and abused Jesus, Joseph treats even his dead body with dignity and respect. Although executed criminals were often buried in a common grave, or even left as carrion for wild beasts, Joseph carefully places the body of Jesus in a special tomb, a place befitting the dignity of the

coming Resurrection.

An image of Jesus lying in Joseph's grave is inscribed on the antemensals on every altar of the Orthodox Church. Standing on the south side of the altar and facing that image each Sunday during Matins, the priest proclaims the prescribed Eiothonion, one of the eleven Resurrection stories from the gospels. The altar, thus representing Joseph's tomb, is preeminently the liturgical *situs* of the Resurrection.

Michelangelo, in his final and less famous *Pieta*, the one at Florence, added a third figure, Joseph of Arimathea, whom he sculpted in his own likeness. I have long thought, similarly, that that just man who buried Jesus in his own sepulcher serves as a model for all believers. That tomb, originally planned for Joseph, has been unoccupied these many centuries, a symbol of the hope we have for our own graves.

©2003 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php