

## Good Friday---2009---St. John's, Roanoke

Just as he had no place to lay his head during his life, so he had no tomb where his body might be placed after his death. He knew that the body was only a shell that we occupy for a time and what happens to it after physical death is of no consequence.

Joseph of Arimathaea was a rich man and a follower of Jesus. Those two things are not mutually exclusive, even though Jesus taught that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. That's not because of the things that one has that equal wealth, but because of what those things do to the person who has them. Joseph of Arimathaea had learned that at least part of the reason God gives riches to some people is so that they might provide for those who have little. It is a hard lesson in life to learn that all the things we have are not really ours. They belong to the Lord and the time always comes when the Lord has need of them. So long as we think they are ours we give them up only grudgingly or paternalistically, if at all.

The message and the meaning of Good Friday is that God has given to us to a degree and in a way that we can never match, can never merit, and do not deserve. God has given all for our sakes. It is a contradiction in terms for someone to be described as a "stingy Christian." Either a person is stingy or a Christian. It is impossible to be both at the same time.

Joseph of Arimathaea could have withheld the tomb and the linen shroud for his own use or the use of his family. Because he had become a Christian, he could not withhold them when Jesus had need of them. So, Joseph unfolds the white, linen cloth and lays it on the ground. It is close-woven and white, about twice the size of an outstretched human frame. It is a shroud. Joseph has leaned a small wooden ladder on the far side of the vertical pole to which the crossbeam had been tied. He climbs up two steps and places a rope around the dead man's chest. With force, and with sorrow that there must be such force, he wrenches the spikes from the feet and the nails from the wrists laid flat against the crossbeam. The body slumps forward into waiting arms. The body seems so light now. Joseph kneels and lays the body on the shroud and winds it back down over the head to the feet. A hurried anointing, as is the custom will be done at the tomb.

Slowly, the burial party walks to the borrowed tomb. The door to the tomb is a hole in stone, no higher than the waist. Jesus goes in backward, on his knees, bearing the shoulders of Jesus. A servant holds his legs up out of the dirt. "Thank you," Joseph says as he gently places the body on a rock ledge. Joseph emerges. There is a descending groove from the left to the

front of the door. Joseph and several other men place their shoulders and weight behind the stone and slowly it rolls along the groove. There is the sound of stone on stone as the door shuts; never to be opened again is this lifetime.

There, the deed is done. The final act of courtesy is given. A Galilean peasant teacher and part time carpenter had been given a pauper's burial.

For many, this is the end of the story. For us, it is only the beginning. All that happened on a Friday. This is a Friday. By the grace of Almighty God we call them both by the preposterous name "GOOD!"

What do we need to remember about this Friday? It might be good to recall that it was the religious hierarchy that condemned him. They were convinced that they knew the mind and will of God and this man named Jesus was an imposter. Always sit easy with the institutional church. We may have no choice but to be gathered as an institution but the institution has been and can be wrong today. Be careful when you ask that the institution condemn someone or some approach to life. It may well be that new learning and new discernment of God's will forces us into just the opposite direction. That, too, has happened in history.

Also remember that although Pilate sat on the judgment seat, it was he and not Jesus who was being tried and judged. It is always that way when we sit on the judgment seat. There is a "Gabbatha" for every person. Parent, teacher, friend, leader, preacher, church member, Christian, all place us from time to time on the judgment seat. Make no mistake. There will always come a day when Jesus is brought out to each of us as we sit on that seat. The Good Friday dilemma is-- will we defend him or will we, too, hand him over to be crucified? Amen.