

Palm Sunday

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] In the early 1980s, I bought a T-shirt that I thought was pretty cool. It had 100 fish painted on the front. 99 of them were swimming one direction.

There was one fish painted a different colour that was swimming the opposite direction, and it had the words on it, swim against the tide. I thought it was cool.

I thought it was a little bit rebellious. And it never occurred to me that a million other people thought exactly the same. I say that because as we come to the end of Matthew 27, there's a lot of swimming against the tide.

This end of the chapter is a bridge between the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus, the astonishing chapter that we're going to look at next week of Easter.

And the question is, why don't we go straight from the death of Jesus to the resurrection? Why do we have these four fairly unexciting stories before we come to the resurrection?

[1 : 04] And I think the answer is that these four stories show us something of how the death of Jesus works in the lives of real people. What are the practical implications?

How does Jesus' death apply to us in the ordinary circumstances of our lives? There are, of course, actually five responses to Jesus' death.

But God's response we have to wait for, chapter 28. And so we just look at these four human responses. And the first three all have to swim against the tide.

And the fourth is the view of the majority. So let's just look at them briefly together. The first group of people are the careless in verse 54.

This verse tells us the astonishing change that happens in the soldiers, the very ones who crucified Jesus. These are the same ones who had mocked Jesus in the safety of the governor's courtyard, who'd watched him be whipped and scourged.

[2 : 10] In fact, they'd watched him all day. They had been the ones who had inflicted terrible pain on Jesus, nailing him to the cross. It was their job to kill him by crucifixion.

And for them, it was just another day at the office, really. They certainly did not expect to become believers. They were careless and they were callous.

But as they watched Jesus and as they heard him throughout, as they saw the darkness and they heard the cry of dereliction and they saw the curtain being torn in two, in verse 54, we read, they were filled with awe and said, truly, this was the son of God.

They've got nothing on earth to gain by declaring their own faith. It's like they couldn't help themselves. And what had got hold of them was the godness of this man, the divinity of Jesus. And it was precisely his death on the cross that had shown it to them. They didn't understand all of it. They didn't understand much at all, really. But as they looked at Jesus on the cross, they saw something of the face of God in Jesus Christ.

[3 : 26] And their faith goes out to him and they say, truly, this was the son of God. It's the basic Christian confession. It doesn't come by trying hard to have faith.

It comes by looking at the death of Jesus. And it's completely unexpected for these guys. They're callous and they're careless. But in making this statement of faith, they change sides.

It's not that they believe certain abstract truths about God. They say, we met God in this man. That God, there's something about Jesus that reveals God to us and the way he's died.

This one whom we've just killed. But looking at the death of Jesus, we can see something of how committed God is to us. And we want to trust him. We want to be committed to him.

And their spiritual eyes are opened. And they begin a new life of Christian discipleship. It's a very simple thing for them to say. It's a very simple thing for them to do.

[4 : 34] But it's not an easy one. And by doing this, they have changed sides. And they've begun to swim against the tide. They swim against the Roman battalion and the crowds.

And who knows whoever else? By choosing to identify with Jesus in his death, they've set the course of their lives. And of course, one of the reasons Matthew tells us this is that it doesn't matter how callous or how careless you are.

If you look into the death of Jesus, if you look into it, you will see God. And you will see Jesus as the Son of God who gave his life so that you might live.

That's the first response. It's the response of the careless. We move from the careless, secondly, to the invisible in verses 55 and 56.

The camera pans back from Jesus hanging dead on the cross and the soldiers confessing. And it pans back to some women who are looking on from a distance.

[5 : 41] It's not a small group. Matthew tells us it's many women. And they're practicing their own form of social distancing. They're out of the way, perhaps out of modesty, perhaps out of safety, we're not told.

What Matthew does tell us is that these women had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him in verse 55.

This word following is the main disciple word. And I call them invisible because Matthew hasn't mentioned them until now. Yet there they were with Jesus.

And here they are still now looking on from a distance. They had been with Jesus all the way, ministering to him and his practical needs. Matthew tells us some of their names and we know them from the other gospels.

And we also know that some of these women came from the top of society and were wealthy.

Others came from the bottom of society and were very broken. And now suddenly they're thrown into focus.

[6 : 46] And although Matthew tells this very gently, these women become the central players from now on in his gospel. They're the first ones at the tomb on Sunday morning.

They're the first ones to meet the angel. They're the first ones to meet the risen Jesus. And they're the first ones to bear the good news to others. But here on this day of death before the day of resurrection, as they look on, it shows us something of what it means and what it feels like to follow Jesus.

All the love and serving that they have done seems to come to an end. It seems to have been for nothing. And there's nothing that you can do. All your love and serving cannot fix things.

All you can do is offer your presence and your patience and wait for God to do as he's promised.

Because Jesus calls us to follow him even when we don't understand.

When it looks like things are out of control. When most of the opinions about Jesus are just blasphemy. When it seems that there is no hope. There you are, bearing silent witness to your love for him and his love for you.

[8 : 03] Just by being there. And for the women it's a simple thing to do. But it's not an easy one. It demonstrates that they're choosing sides.

That they have to swim against the tide to identify with Jesus in his death in this way. And it doesn't matter how invisible you feel.

If you keep your eyes on Jesus and on his death. He will strengthen you to do whatever it is he needs you to do. That's the second group, the invisible.

We move thirdly to the fearful. And in verse 57 we meet Joseph of Arimathea. He is the consummate insider. He's a rich man.

He's successful. He was a member of the Sanhedrin. So he would have been there at the fake trial of Jesus in Caiaphas' house. And he said nothing in Jesus' defense.

[9 : 02] John's gospel later on tells us that he kept his views about Jesus, his belief about Jesus secret. Because he was afraid of the Jews, his peers.

And isn't it amazing how fear holds so many back from openly identifying with Jesus? Particularly when you've had some success. And the people around you who are important, the key people in your life.

It's easy to fear what they think. But something has changed for Joseph. And he does something that takes great courage and great generosity. He puts his reputation on the line and he puts his resources at Jesus' disposal.

He goes straight to Pilate, the governor. He has personal access. And he asks for the body of Jesus. Now in those days the bodies of those crucified were not given decent burials. Often they were just thrown by the wayside and left to rot or to be devoured by scavengers. You couldn't put them in your family tomb. The law was that if you did that you couldn't bury any more members of your family afterward.

[10:13] And Joseph had bought a fresh new tomb in Jerusalem. He'd moved down to Jerusalem. He was going to live and die in Jerusalem. And he bought a family tomb.

And some of these tombs can take dozens of people. No doubt this was a major burial tomb. But again something's changed for Joseph. Something that has overpowered his fears and his hiding. Something that's even loosened the hold of wealth on him. Something that's even more important to him than his family. And it's the death of Jesus. We don't know, we're not told how Joseph came to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But it is in Jesus' death that Joseph finds the courage to take up his own cross and to publicly follow Jesus.

There are no earthly advantages for Joseph in doing this. But in seeing how far Jesus was willing to go for him, Joseph is now willing to risk it all for Jesus.

[11:19] To take that step where he goes public with his faith and nails his colours to the mast with joy. And identifying publicly with Jesus in this way, Joseph recognises that the worst thing that can happen to him is not to be killed.

But it's to be separated from the love of God in Jesus Christ. He's seeing that in the death of Jesus, there's something more important than his position or his power or his prestige.

Here is something worth giving his life for. Here is something worth living for. Something more important than life itself. It's Jesus. And this is before the resurrection.

So in verse 59, Joseph takes the body down from the cross. This is not a one man job. We know that Nicodemus helped him from the other gospels.

Did the women join him in taking Jesus' body down from the cross and place it in the tomb? We're not sure. But at this point, you'll notice body, body, tomb, tomb.

[12:27] Because the Bible is unafraid to look at death in the face. And I think the great thing for us right now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the fear and the anxiety that spread through the pandemic is the fear of death.

Despite the fact that here in Canada, we've done our best to domesticate death, to pretend that it's just part of life or to say silly poems to each other like, I'm just in the next room, or that the one who has died lives on in their children.

Or even worse, to imagine that we're in control of death through medically assisted dying. The Bible is clear. Death remains the enemy. It separates us from this life and from one another.

It mocks all the achievements that we have succeeded in. There's nothing dignified about dying. But since Jesus has tasted death for us, the power of death has been broken.

Certainly the process of dying may be awful. But death itself has no power over us. Death itself cannot separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

[13:47] Which means that all who belong to Jesus Christ defeat death in him. And Joseph's actions in giving Jesus his tomb, that's a deeply personal thing to do.

It's a simple choice, but it's not an easy one. And in doing so, he takes Jesus' side because he knows that Jesus has taken his.

And now he will be swimming against the tide, the whole tide of the Sanhedrin, who he used to fear. My favourite thing about this little episode of Joseph is that Jesus only really needs the tomb for a couple of days.

On Sunday morning, he's going to be raised from the dead. He won't need the tomb anymore. And so this brave and expensive gift becomes the theatre for the glory of the resurrection.

But there is a fourth response, and I've called this the majority response. At the last paragraph of Matthew 27, the chief priests and Pharisees go to Pilate.

[14:54] And they arrange to have the tomb locked down, secure and guarded. Not because they thought there was any real chance of Jesus rising from the dead.

But because they wanted to stop the disciples stealing the body and claiming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And the last verse, verse 66, we read, So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

And I think it's a reminder to us that the choices that the soldiers made and that the women made and that Joseph made do not take place in a vacuum.

The taking Jesus side will always be costly and you'll always be in the minority. But the most important thing here is that in their hostility toward Jesus, the chief priests and the Pharisees and even Pilate are serving the purposes of God.

I mean, they provide terrific evidence for the reality of the resurrection that the disciples could never have stolen the body of Jesus away and pretended he'd risen again. Almost everyone I speak to today from a safe distance of six feet says something like, It's just a crazy time.

[16:16] We don't understand what's going on. And I think most of us can say I'm into that. But the death of Jesus and the burial of Jesus show with great clarity that all things are being ordered by the hands of our infinitely wise God.

And the things are that he is working out his purposes perfectly in all the things that are happening, even the things that are around us now.

When it seems like nothing is happening, even when things seem so against us in these things to God is working out for his own glory and for our good.

The purposes that he has in Christ. So, this is the end of Matthew 27. And the death of Jesus changes everything for us. For the careless, for the invisible, for the fearful, even for the majority. And it can change everything for you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.