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BE A SILENT HERO!

Today's Text: Mark 15: 39- 47

Extracts:

So when *the centurion* ...saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, *“Truly this Man was the Son of God!”* ...Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, *Joseph of Arimathea*, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and *taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.* ... So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph ... and he *laid Him in a tomb* which had been hewn out of the rock, *and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb, and Mary Magdalene... observed where He was laid* [Mk 15: 39-43; 45-47]

David Livingstone (1813-1873)¹ was a well known British explorer and missionary who contributed to bringing Central and Southern Africa under the influence of European missionaries, followed later by the colonial control of that vast territory by Great Britain. David Livingstone died in Africa (May 1, 1873), but on the insistence of the British authorities, his body was retrieved and buried with honours in Westminster Abbey, London, on April 18, 1874. What you may hardly read about is what Livingstone's African travelling companions, Chuma and Susi, did. They dried the body of their dead friend in the sun, tied it to a pole and marched for nine months from Chitambo (in modern Zambia) to Bagamovo (on the coast of modern Tanzania) to hand over the corpse for shipment to Europe. Has any European historian ever followed up to know whatever happened to them and how they walked thousands of miles back home (if they ever did)? They were the silent heroes in the David Livingstone story.

In your daily experience, you may come across people who are quietly doing great things for God and His Christ. They are not clamouring for any limelight. In fact, people hardly know what they are doing. But, without their work, you may never see your favourite religious show on television or have clean chairs to sit on during your service. Are you one of such people? This week's study, based on the story of Joseph of Arimathea and others, will assist you to become a silent hero.

¹ Based on the following sources: Galen B. Royer, “David Livingstone: Africa's Great Missionary and Explorer,” <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bliving2.html> and “Chuma and Susi,” From Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuma_and_Susi

1. Background: How we came to know how and where Jesus was buried

The arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus had been a traumatic experience for His disciples as well as the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities. His disciples went into hiding for fear of being killed along with Him. The Jewish leaders had gotten rid of a ‘blasphemer’ of the Law of Moses and the Romans had quashed another threat to the draconian rule of the Emperor. However, on the third day after His death, Jerusalem and Rome were shaken by the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. How? Well, it took the determination and the doggedness of a few “silent workers” who provided the evidence, people who took personal risks concerning the body of Jesus. We shall call them silent heroes but let us leave how to identify them for later.

In those days, crucifixion was the common mode of executing condemned criminals that were not Roman citizens. Church history confirms that while Peter was crucified (upside down according to his wish), Paul, being a Roman citizen [Acts 22; 25-28], was beheaded. On the day of Christ’s death, two thieves were crucified with Him, one on His left and the other on His right [Matt. 27: 38]. Usually, crucified criminals were allowed to suffer and die on the cross before they were “plucked” down and buried in mass and unmarked graves. Therefore, Jesus could easily have been buried in an unmarked grave along with many others. However, on that occasion, some silent heroes showed up and changed history with their bravery. Some of such heroes were as follows:

a) *The Centurion*

The centurion was the top Roman military officer who supervised the crucifixion of Jesus. Therefore, his loyalty was first and foremost to the Emperor. It was his duty to ensure that condemned criminals died on the cross and to make reports to Pontius Pilate, the local Roman governor. If he had any personal opinion about any of such criminals, he was not expected to express it; otherwise, one of his subordinates ambitious for his position could report him to higher authorities for a treasonable felony offence! But the centurion on duty at Christ’s crucifixion was different.

Firstly, I believe he was the one who authorized Simon of Cyrene to help Jesus to bear His cross [Mk 15: 21]. No other condemned criminal was reportedly given that privilege. Secondly, after Jesus had cried out with a loud voice and breathed His last, the centurion standing opposite Him said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!” [v. 39]. Finally, when Pontius Pilate wanted to ascertain if Jesus had in deed died, following a burial request from Joseph of Arimathea, it was to this same centurion that he turned who released the body of Jesus to Joseph [vv. 44- 45]. That centurion did much more for Jesus and His earthly ministry than the majority of His disciples that He had lived and spoken with for three years. That centurion was a silent hero of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

b) *Joseph of Arimathea*

Joseph came from Arimathea, a town 20 miles north-east of Jerusalem. Although he was a prominent member of the Jewish Council [v. 43], he “had not consented to their decision and deed” [Lk 23: 51]. In fact, ‘he was himself waiting for the kingdom of God’ [Mk 15: 43]. John’s Gospel puts it that he was “*a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews*” [Jn 19: 38].

On this occasion, we are told that Joseph took “*courage*, went in to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus” [v. 43]. Our first puzzle is why he did that. The first part of the answer lies in the Law of Moses for those who were hanged on a tree. It states [Deut. 21: 22-23]:

If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day

If the Jews confronted him, Joseph could plead the Law of Moses for his action. But how about the Romans who practised mass burial? Why should this be different? The answer lies in the fact that, under Roman jurisprudence, Pilate had pronounced Jesus innocent of the charges against Him [Lk 23: 14] but had gone on to sentence Him to death in deference to the demands of the Jews. That was why Pilate washed his hands and said the blood of Jesus was on the heads of the Jews, not his own [Matt. 27: 24]. Therefore, the Romans did not mind to let a Jew have the body of Jesus.

After confirming from the centurion that Jesus had died, he authorized His body to be released to Joseph. With the fine linen that he had bought, Joseph wrapped the body of Jesus and “laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb” [Mk 15: 44-46]. John’s Gospel confirms that Joseph was accompanied by another secret disciple of Jesus, *Nicodemus*, who brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, in accordance with the custom of the Jews to bury. They did everything hurriedly because Sabbath Day was observed from the evening of Friday [Jn 19: 38-42]. On account of their gallantry, the Christian world would come to know where Jesus was buried.

c) *Mary Magdalene*

Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons [Mk 16: 9; Lk 8: 2] became His most faithful follower. She did not miss any of the gruesome events, from the arrest of Jesus on Thursday night to His death on Friday and resurrection on Sunday. She led a group of other devout women, such as Mary the mother of the sons of Zebedee, “who

also followed [Jesus] and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem” [Mk 15: 40-41]. As Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus for burial, “Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus *observed where He was laid*” [v. 47]. Why did they do that?

As we had earlier noted, the body of Jesus could not be properly prepared for burial according to Jewish custom because the observance of Sabbath Day had started that Friday evening. So, Mary Magdalene and the other women observed the spot so as to be able to come back after the Sabbath to anoint the body of Jesus. That was what they came for on Sunday morning only to discover that Christ had risen [Mk 16: 1-6]! It took Mary Magdalene to first break the news of Christ’s resurrection to Peter and the other disciples. She was the silent hero of the resurrection story.

2. Qualities of silent heroes

From our study above, silent heroes tend to exhibit the following qualities, among others:

a) *They fear God*

It takes more than mere altruism (philanthropy or selflessness) to do what those silent heroes did. It takes more than love of humanity. It could only have come from the fear of God. The centurion had seen enough executions to know that something was different about Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were secret disciples of Jesus even though they remained prominent members of the Jewish Council. For Mary Magdalene, Jesus was her life and breath because He had expelled seven demons from her, evil spirits that had made her life miserable. Therefore, even though they did not as yet understand the prophecies concerning the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, they knew Him in person and in deed.

Take the example of the Hebrew midwives during the reign of the wicked Pharaoh that wanted all male children of Hebrews killed at birth. The King of Egypt had instructed them, “When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stools, if it is a son, then you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live.” However, “the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive” [Ex. 1: 15-17]. It was that fear of God that saved the life of Moses that God ultimately used to deliver the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt.

When you have the fear of God in any situation where you find yourself, whether in the church, school, business or office, you will do only what

God says is right. You will not, for example, run an abortion clinic just because the law allows you to do so. You will not steal public funds for private use just because nobody will know. The will of God becomes your goal, strategy and conduct.

b) *They take personal risks without any assurance of immediate reward*

Look at the personal risks that the centurion, Joseph, Nicodemus and Mary Magdalene took. They did so even without any assurance that they would succeed or receive immediate personal rewards. Look at what Chuma and Susi did to transport the body of David Livingstone over thousands of miles over unknown terrain full of natural and man-made dangers. They travelled by foot and it took them nine months to get there! That is the stuff that silent heroes are made of.

Most of us are too risk-averse. We hate any inconvenience that may arise from striving to do what is right. We would rather let sleeping dogs lie than remove the drugged food that is making watch dogs fall asleep on duty! We would rather pretend not to notice rather than correct an infectious error. For example, rather than correct the error of the people who had asked Aaron (in the absence of Moses) to make them a god to worship, he carved them a golden calf and even encouraged them to serve it, saying, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!” [Ex. 32: 1-4] The people corrupted themselves and, for their punishment, God afflicted them with a plague and about three thousand of the offenders died [v. 28].

c) *They do their work quietly and in secret*

The silent heroes in our story (the centurion, Joseph, Nicodemus and Mary Magdalene) went about their work quietly and in secret. They did not do it to impress the apostles and other disciples that held more prominent positions in Jesus’ ministry. They worked because they believed that it had to be done and it was *their privilege* to do it.

It was the same thing that the Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed-Melech, did when he heard that Jeremiah the prophet had been cast into a dungeon in the court of the king’s prison for daring to tell the truth about the outcome of the impending Babylonian attack. As soon as the Ethiopian heard what had been done to the prophet of God, he went boldly to Zedekiah the king of Judah, to complain of the evil that had been done and how Jeremiah was likely to die from hunger in that dungeon. With the king’s permission, he took men with him and got the prophet released [Jer. 38:6- 13]. He did that and quietly too because it was the right thing to do, not because of any personal benefit to him.

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His listeners, “When you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly” [**Matt. 6: 3-4**]. The Hebrew midwives in the days of the birth of Moses were openly blessed for God “provided households for them” [**Ex. 1: 21**]. For rescuing Jeremiah from instant death in the dungeon, God counted it in Ebed-Melech’s favour by guaranteeing his protection from the invading Babylonian enemies [**Jer. 39: 15-18**]. Mary Magdalene was the first disciple to see and speak with the risen Christ [**Jn 20: 11-17**]. What a special privilege!

3. Conclusion: Jesus is the greatest silent hero ever!

Born in a manger and educated in a carpenter’s workshop, Jesus came in human flesh to do the will of His Father [**Jn 17: 1-8**]. He performed numerous miracles and most times, He would tell those healed, “See that no one knows it” [**Matt. 9: 30**] or command them “strictly that no one should know it” [**Mk 5: 43**]. He laid down His life of His own will [**Jn 10:18**] in spite of the excruciating pain and suffering associated with it. He died among thieves and was buried in a borrowed grave. Except perhaps what He wrote down when the woman caught in adultery was about to be stoned by her accusers [**Jn 8:6**], He did not write anything about Himself. Yet, if everything that He did were written, “one by one ... even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” [**Jn 21: 25**]. That is a super silent hero for you and His name is Jesus! He has said that believers will do greater works than He has done [**Jn 14: 12**]. Are you one of such believers?

Be a silent hero!