

## Prayer

We love You, Lord God,  
 Bless us this day as we think about the meaning of Your death,  
 And bless us as we look forward to Your glorious resurrection.  
 Transform us by Your Holy Spirit, and make us worthy of Your Grace,  
 So that we might live for ever as people saved by faith.  
 Thank You, Lord God, AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Universities

At the end of this week of prayer for Universities, pray that God will use the great capacity for wisdom and learning that He has placed within people of every generation. Pray that God will raise up great scientists, engineers, artists and scholars of every kind, who openly profess faith. Pray that they will be a powerful witness to the world that God is forever present in His world.

## Meditation

What is this strange day?  
 A day that lies between two other days;  
 Good Friday, and Easter Day.  
 It is the Sabbath Day, when 'nothing shall be done'  
 And God who made all things declared a rest.  
 I wonder; did it try His patience?  
 Waiting for the Easter morn,  
 Waiting for the glory of the moment  
 Waiting for the appointed time  
 When Resurrection's power could be let loose,  
 And glory be made known to all!  
 So now we have the greatest gift  
 The world could ever have; a Saviour!  
 And the declaration 'Jesus is alive'  
 Will sound throughout the world on Easter Day!  
 But Lord, forgive my enquiring mind,  
 For I'd love to know the answer;  
 When did He really escape the tomb?

## Bible Study - Mark 15:42-47

<sup>42</sup> When it was evening, and since it was the day of Preparation, the day before the Sabbath, <sup>43</sup> Joseph of Arimathea, a highly regarded member of the Council, who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, went courageously to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>44</sup> Pilate was surprised to hear that He was already dead, so he summoned the centurion and asked him whether Jesus had been dead for some time. <sup>45</sup> When he learned from the centurion that this was so, he granted the body to Joseph. <sup>46</sup> Then Joseph bought fine linen cloth, and he took the body down and wrapped it in the linen. Then he laid it in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. <sup>47</sup> Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.

### Review

This reading is something of an anticlimax, and it describes what happened towards the end of the day Jesus died. Yesterday we read about Jesus' death, and immediately afterwards a

number of significant things happened, Mark describes the rending of the Temple veil (15:38) and the 'conversion' of the centurion at Jesus' death (15:39). Now, however, Mark turns from the extraordinary to the ordinary, and the simple matter of what was done with Jesus' body after He had died.

Most of this passage is about Joseph of Arimathea, and a great deal of mystery surrounds this man. Firstly, it is not known where 'Arimathea' was! This might be one of a number of places within Israel, but it is by no means certain. Church tradition, however, presents Joseph as a rich man either of Jewish extraction or a proselyte from North Africa, and he is often depicted as being black. Certainly, Joseph was a man who was a 'highly regarded' (15:43) within the Council of Jerusalem (the 'Sanhedrin'), so he was an 'elder' of the Jewish community. He also appears to have had contacts to approach Pilate directly, a rare privilege, since Pilate usually dealt with the Jews through the high priestly family in Jerusalem, normally Caiaphas.

All this is a little difficult, because if this was so, then surely Joseph would have been present at the Council meetings that questioned Jesus and handed Him over to Pilate (14:53f.). Was he involved in condemning Jesus? The other possibility is that he was not happy with what happened at the meeting, and did not accept Caiaphas' decision about how to deal with Jesus. Certainly, John's Gospel indicates that there was some agonising debate amongst the members of the Council before Jesus was condemned (John 11:49). We must assume that Joseph was one of a number, including Nicodemus, who sought to follow Jesus without compromising their position and role within Judaism; could this be what Mark refers to when he says that Joseph was 'awaiting the kingdom of God' (15:43)?

Joseph was a man of substance who knew what to do to organise things. When he knew Jesus had died, He set about arranging for his proper burial. No-one else was in a position to do this, for his followers had scattered and were poor. Joseph, however, made preparations worthy of someone of importance. Firstly, he went to Pilate to obtain the release of the body of Jesus; Mark reports that Pilate 'was surprised' to hear that Jesus was dead (15:44). This was because people who were crucified normally took more than a day to die; crucifixion was, after all, a method of torture. In order to verify what happened, Pilate questioned a centurion present at Jesus' death, the one who had been deeply affected by what he had seen, and professed a faith that Jesus was 'the Son of God' (15:39). A centurion's was regarded as a worthy person in the world of the Roman Empire, and his testimony was powerful evidence that Jesus had indeed died.

With this evidence, Pilate handed over Jesus' body for burial. Mark does not report any of the great fuss about sealing and guarding Jesus' body found, for example in Matthew (27:62-66). He describes the care with which Joseph handled Jesus' body, using an expensive linen cloth, and placing it in a rock tomb, commonly assumed to be one that had been prepared by Joseph for himself. Rock hewn tombs were expensive, and only for the rich. Joseph acted quickly because it was not permissible under Jewish law for Jesus to be left on the tree overnight (Deut 21:23 'his corpse must not remain all night on a tree; you will bury him that same day'). Also, his covering of Jesus with a linen shroud was the proper 'male' thing to do; concealing Jesus' nakedness after his body was removed from the Cross. Lastly, Joseph himself rolled a stone over the entrance to the tomb (15:46), a large stone cut for the purpose. It was positioned so that one man could roll it into position, but once in position it would have taken considerable force to move it. Lastly, Mark concludes by telling us simply that two of the women who previously watched Jesus' death on the cross, Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of Jesus (and James), witnessed the burial of Jesus.

There is something orderly and very worthy about what Joseph did for Jesus, and the whole scene completes the picture of a sincere attempt to administer proper funeral rites to Jesus. This story completes a tragic day, the most tragic day of history. God is still able to speak to us through this passage in a number of ways, but we can all reflect upon God's provision even in such dire circumstances. In addition, it is very easy to read the story of the death and resurrection of our Lord and forget details such as this, and yet they are important. If we are really to believe in the bodily resurrection of our Lord, a key part of traditional Christian faith,

then what happened to Jesus after His death is extremely important. Jesus was indeed honoured in death, but praise God, we will soon discover that Jesus was far from dead!

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How important was it for Jesus to be buried in a tomb in this way?
2. Discuss in your group what significance these events may have had for the early church as it sought to provide evidence of Jesus' death.
3. Joseph of Arimathea was a good man, and clearly wealthy. Discuss whether a rich man could really enter the kingdom of God! (see also Mark 10:25)

## Discipleship

*Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to Easter.*

It is extraordinary to discover that just when we thought the disciples were in disarray and incapable of functioning, people emerged such as Joseph and the women appear who are ready to do God's will. Reflect upon how God used these people to do His will, and consider how God does similar things in our midst today.

## Final Prayer

God of grace and God of glory, prepare our hearts for the great day that is ahead. Let us not be impatient in our waiting, or too lazy in our expectation, but happy to be led by You towards the great resurrection rejoicing that awaits us! Thanks be to God. AMEN