

## 01 A WALK THROUGH THE GALLERY

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea . . .  
- Luke 23:50

When I think of story told through portraiture, I think of Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister, during the dark days of the Second World War. Many have tried to capture something of this man, by camera or brush. Whether it was Churchill in conference with his allies, or looking grim-faced and determined; whether with his family in the country, or coming out of a black taxi as he gives the famous two-fingered “V for Victory” salute: each portrait paints Churchill in a completely different light. Every one provoking and unearthing a range of responses in the viewer. This is the skill of the portrait artist or photographer. Each work offers scope for the creativity and inspiration of the artist, but whether portrayed as a family man or man of war, all are recognizably Churchill.

Perhaps my favorite, and the most famous, photograph of Churchill was done by Yousuf Karsh. Karsh is widely regarded as one of the best portrait photographers of all time. He had been waiting to photograph Churchill after he spoke before the Canadian Parliament. He wanted to capture Churchill in all his fullness. He wanted to express as much of his life as possible in a single photograph. Karsh, therefore, set up his camera and lighting the night before. In his book, *Faces of Our Time*, Karsh recounts how Churchill’s mood was sour from the moment he walked through the door. He directed Churchill to sit in a chair, describing the scene as follows: “He was in no mood for portraiture and two minutes were all that he would allow me as he passed from the House of Commons chamber to an anteroom. Two niggardly minutes in which I must try to put on film a man who had already written or inspired a library of books, baffled all his biographers, filled the world with his fame and me, on this occasion, with dread.”

Churchill had not been told that he would be photographed. Despite his qualms, he relented, then pulled out a cigar, lit it, and began puffing away. Karsh recalls how Churchill’s cigar was everpresent: “I held out an ashtray, but he would not dispose of it. I went back to my camera and made sure that everything was all right technically. I waited; he continued to chomp vigorously at his cigar. I waited. Then I spotted him and, without premeditation, but ever so respectfully, I said, ‘Forgive me, sir,’ and plucked the cigar out of his mouth. By the time I got back to my camera, he looked so belligerent he could have devoured me. It was at that instant that I took the photograph.”

By plucking the cigar from Churchill’s mouth without permission, Karsh was able to elicit a fantastic pose and facial expression from the great leader and thereby capture an exceptional photo.

This photo captures merely one facet of Churchill’s personality and character. To recognize Churchill more fully, we would need all the portraits from every artist that sought to represent him artistically. Only then could we put them together to get a fully rounded picture of the man.

It is the same when the Gospel writers tell us the story of Christ's crucifixion. One after the other, the four Gospel writers— Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—steady their hands. Each artist, with considered, thought-out brush strokes, uses different colors to paint upon a canvas their perspective of what transpired on that fatal weekend.

Four portraits. One exhibition. And one figure standing at the center of all four canvases: Jesus. Surrounding Jesus in these portraits are disciples who were important figures in His life. What makes this gallery particularly remarkable is this somewhat obscure figure who appears in all portraits but about whom we know very little. What we do know is that he was significant to the story of the resurrection of Christ. That figure is Joseph of Arimathea.

Each Gospel writer draws out a different dimension of this man named Joseph. As all great portrait artists do, each brush stroke finds and captures an entire hinterland and tells us more about this unassuming character. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each show a different angle and expression of who this lone figure was. We have a handful of verses to help us piece together what we see—a regular man written into the divine story.

We know from the Gospel writers that Joseph was a man of prominence and a business person. He encountered some of the most acute moral dilemmas we face in our age. He was well known in his field, holding a position of power and influence. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He had a passion for justice, he stood up against the crowd, and he was not part of the majority that condemned Jesus. This was a man with a conscience who proclaimed values that aligned with his practice.

Like so many of our generation, Joseph knew the value of strategic partnerships. He was a rich man who used his riches well. He stewarded his affluence and his influence. He was not a theologian. He was not a church leader. He was a secret disciple. Just as many of us fear the opinions of our colleagues, he too feared his Jewish contemporaries. He was a reluctant follower, hesitant to share his faith in the mixing pot that was the Roman empire. He had the same fears, worries, and anxieties we all feel and encounter in our everyday environments. Yet he shows us what an encounter with Jesus Christ can do to an individual life. Joseph was transformed into a disciple who risked it all. He approached Pilate asking permission for the dead body of Jesus. He paid a price to anoint Jesus' body. He partnered with his friend Nicodemus to prepare the body for burial. And he placed Jesus in his own tomb. It is this one event that writes him into the pages of scripture forever.

The description of this man doesn't have the flair of a Lazarus raised from the dead. Nor does it match the excitement of Jesus healing the sick or cleansing ten lepers. However, Joseph's depiction strikes a chord with the contemporary mindset of ordinary laypeople more than most by emphasizing justice and conscience, as well as the use of power.

In a world in which power often supersedes small efforts, it is refreshing to read about ordinary people doing extraordinary things in order to resolve the great moral issues of our time. It's not just the big guns or the religious establishment who have a major impact on faith; it's not just those at the top of governments or big organizations that can effect change, but those at every level who face acute moral dilemmas and still do the right thing. The athlete who refuses

to take the drugs, the politician who doesn't take a bribe, the journalist who stands up against fake news, the citizen who is not swept along by moments of madness but stays cool when the mob surrounds them. It is the man who requests to carry the dead body of Jesus and does not expect to be recorded in the pages of scripture.

Joseph of Arimathea is an example for the practical businessperson going to work every day. He is for the leader who has to chair meetings, lead teams, share strategy, and face the moral dilemmas of the workplace. He is for the woman who seeks to balance the practical, the pragmatic, and the spiritual. He is for those who don't make the front page news. He speaks to our generation from the small print of the great gospel story with a message of devotion and discipleship.

In a world where harsh compromises have to be made every single day, we struggle with issues of confidence and conscience. How can we live with integrity and spiritual insight in our everyday lives? This is the great challenge of everyone today. Whether you are in the workplace, in a church, in a voluntary organization, you face hard and difficult decisions that affect the lives of others.

As we examine and move from canvas to canvas in the gallery, we view Joseph's life from a new angle, a fresh perspective; we see this remarkable man of the utmost relevance to our age. From each of the four Gospel accounts, we learn something new about the character and intentions of Joseph. Let's examine each portrait separately.

Matthew's account is succinct and concise in that he paints everything we need to know about Joseph in four short brushstrokes—four verses that create a compelling picture. We learn that Joseph was a rich man, an honorable man, and therefore an unlikely disciple. Yet he uses his wealth not as a wall to insulate himself from the need, but rather as an opportunity to partner with others to live sacrificially. As we study Matthew's portrait, we see that he's painted Joseph as a man of risk. We see him approaching Pilate and asking for Jesus' body. He is the only disciple left in proximity to Jesus as the others stand at a distance. While we observe the painting, we can't help but think, "Where were Jesus' disciples?" His body was abandoned. However, a new figure, Joseph of Arimathea, emerges from the shadows and embraces the task ahead.

As we move slowly along the gallery, we come across another portrait, painted by Luke. Luke's picture identifies Joseph as a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. It was this council that not only condemned Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, but sent him to Pilate for a trial and subsequent execution. But, crucially, Luke points out that Joseph was not part of the majority vote which condemned Jesus. This is the passage that highlights for me the central character of Joseph. Luke says he was a "good and righteous man" (Luke 23:50). A devout Jew waiting for the Kingdom of God to be established. A man of conscience as well as strength and action when an injustice is being perpetrated. I see him standing up for the minority and for justice.

While the Pharisees and Sadducees conformed to the opinions of the majority, Joseph was longing for the Messiah to come and restore his relationship with Israel. He was anticipating

the Messiah transforming the earthly fortunes of God's chosen people, which is why Joseph had the courage to go to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. Moreover, Joseph owned the tomb that he lends Jesus, and he is prepared to make himself unclean by touching a dead body. At great risk to his own life, Joseph gives the body the burial it deserves; it is the upright thing to do.

We then move on to the next portrait. It's much smaller than the others, and it's by a man named Mark (Mark 15:42-47). Although the picture is smaller, it is full of detail and with more precise brush strokes than the other paintings. Mark paints his portrait emphasizing that Joseph was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin council who remained a quiet admirer of Jesus during Jesus' earthly life; yet after Jesus' death, he boldly associated with Jesus. The man who claimed and buried the dead body of Jesus was scared to associate with him during his life. Mark's portrait highlights Joseph's humanity by displaying his fear of others' opinions and judgments. Through Mark's portrait, we can see the great risk that Joseph took in stepping forward.

At the end of the gallery, we come across one more painting by a man named John. John's portrait contains details that the other pictures don't have—two extra brush strokes, particularly in regard to the burial of Jesus' body (John 19:38-42). First, John describes how Jesus was buried with spices: a total of seventyfive pounds of myrrh and aloes. These were spices of such value that even the most prominent and wealthy would consider them extravagant. Additionally, there is another figure painted in this picture. His name is Nicodemus, and he was also a secret disciple. We have seen him before. In a darker picture, perhaps at night (John 3:1-10)?

If we step back and look at the full canvas of John's Gospel, we would see an encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and had a conversation with the Galilean rabbi that changed his life forever (John 3:1-10). Though Nicodemus desperately wanted to know Jesus and to understand His message, he knew that publicly associating with Jesus would destroy his reputation. So, Jesus met him where he was at, not judging him for his secrecy; rather, Jesus patiently answered his questions and shared truth with him. The impact Jesus had on Nicodemus during that encounter was enough for him to believe in and follow Christ, even as the majority was yelling to crucify him. Despite the angry populists yelling and crowding around him, Nicodemus would remain resolute in the light because of an encounter that he had with Jesus in the dark.

We read elsewhere in John that, although some wanted Jesus arrested, others were inspired by his messages, claiming that "No one ever spoke like this man!" (John 7:46). The chief priests and Pharisees, however, wanted Jesus arrested due to heresy. But Nicodemus, knowing Jesus' innocence said, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (John 7:51). We see here that Nicodemus believed in due process, and we also see that Nicodemus stood up for truth even when it was difficult and no one was standing with him. Jesus was not arrested at this time, and I believe that Nicodemus speaking up fulfilled a divine purpose in Jesus' continued earthly ministry.

In John's Gospel, we see portraits of two secret disciples using their privilege and position to fight for justice. We see two influential, respected men standing against the mob on behalf of a man who changed their lives with his love, hope, and truth. We see men who went

against the majority, prepared to deal with the backlash because they'd had an encounter with Jesus.

From the portraits that I have described on the easels of all four Gospel writers, I see Joseph of Arimathea as a good and upright man who was not a part of the majority who condemned Jesus. His picture shows a standout member of the Sanhedrin willing to risk it all, to be ridiculed and rejected for what he believes. As I've studied and pondered the Gospel accounts of Joseph for many months, I'm intrigued that Joseph took responsibility for someone that was not himself. He took responsibility for the other, setting aside his interests and possessions.

What strikes me most as we survey the portraiture of Joseph is this heart that he clearly had for other people. This is the defining feature of Joseph of Arimathea; it is as if he is embodying the philosophy of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who said that he sees in another person's face a reflection of himself. He sees the individual's brokenness, pain, and longings—the uncertainties and anxiety in their faces—reflecting his own fears and pain. Like Levinas, Joseph sees the humanity and the glory of people even when the majority seeks to villainize and dehumanize them.<sup>2</sup> He would not be part of our contemporary paradigm whereby the elderly or other social groups are “othered,” treated as intrinsically different from and foreign to oneself.

Joseph associated himself with a dead man, an insurrectionist in the eyes of Rome. He did not “other” Him. He walked away from his prestigious lifestyle and moved towards a man who was no longer the hoped-for Messiah, but rather just another fallen wonderworker. Yet Joseph stood up for this man when it counted, giving his all to serve the One who came to serve us all and give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

The portraits of Joseph's life speak to us all, with easel after easel demonstrating something of relevance to our everyday context and lives. We are looking not at a spiritual giant or a hero of the faith as mentioned in the Hebrews hall of fame, but at a simple businessperson who had encountered the God who spoke for the most ordinary of people.

It might not be on a canvas with paint. It might be in the classroom, in the boardroom, or at home with your children, but I urge and invite you to walk through the gallery with me. To look at the exhibition of Joseph's life with fresh eyes and to lean into the story of a person of the small print who has captivated me and, I pray, will captivate you. I believe that amidst this gallery of portraits, you will find your own story.

