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November 10th: Isaiah 23 & Mark 15

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An oracle against Tyre. The crucifixion.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 23. The oracle concerning Tyre. Wail, O ships of Tarshish! For Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbour.

From the land of Cyprus it is revealed to them. Be still, O inhabitants of the coast! The merchants of Sidon who crossed the sea have filled you, and on many waters your revenue was the grain of Shihur, the harvest of the Nile. You were the merchant of the nations.

Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken, the stronghold of the sea, saying, I have neither laboured nor given birth, I have neither reared young men nor brought up young women. When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre. Cross over to Tarshish! Wail, O inhabitants of the coast! Is this your exultant city whose origin is from days of old, whose feet carried her to settle far away? Who has purposed this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honoured of the earth? The Lord of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory, to dishonour all the honoured of the earth.

Cross over your land like the Nile, O daughter of Tarshish! There is no restraint any more. He has stretched out his hand over the sea, he has shaken the kingdoms. The Lord has given command concerning Canaan to destroy its strongholds.

And he said, You will no more exult, O oppressed virgin daughter of Sidon. Arise, cross over to Cyprus. Even there you will have no rest.

Behold the land of the Chaldeans. This is the people it was not. Assyria destined it for wild beasts.

They erected their siege towers. They stripped her palaces bare. They made her a ruin.

Wail, O ships of Tarshish! For your stronghold is laid waste. In that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, like the days of one king. At the end of seventy years it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute.

Take a harp, go about the city, O forgotten prostitute. Make sweet melody, sing many songs that you may be remembered. At the end of seventy years the Lord will visit Tyre and she will return to her wages and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth.

Her merchandise and her wages will be holy to the Lord. It will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who dwell before the Lord. The series of oracles and prophecies concerning the nations that began in chapter 13 with the oracle concerning Babylon ends in chapter 23 with an oracle concerning Tyre.

Babylon and Tyre were cities with international reputations and significance in the ancient world. Global cities of their day. Even when they were not centres of imperial might, they remained places of immense wealth and trade, historical significance and cultural influence.

If Babylon was more like the London, Paris or Rome of that day, Tyre might have been the Hong Kong, Singapore or Dubai. Situated to the north of the region of Galilee on the Mediterranean coast at the south of modern day Lebanon, Tyre was one of the oldest cities in the world, founded around 2750 BC, taking its name from the Ireland rock that it was built upon. Tyre was originally at the border of the territory given to Asher, although it does not seem that Asher ever controlled the city.

During the reigns of David and Solomon, Hyrum of Tyre had a close relationship with Israel, providing wood and artisans for the building of the temple. In exchange Solomon had given Hyrum 20 Galilean cities, although their relationship soured a bit as Hyrum was not pleased with them. Commonly paired with Sidon, Tyre was the primary city of the maritime civilisation of the Phoenicians, who had lucrative trade routes throughout the Mediterranean and colonies at many points along the North African coast and in

places like Cyprus, Sicily and Malta.

Hyrum had assisted Israel in developing its own sea trade at the height of the kingdom under Solomon. Over a century later Jezebel, the daughter of a king of Tyre, Ethbael, married King Ahab of Israel. In addition to their fabulous wealth, they were a technologically advanced and skilled civilisation.

The citadel of Tyre was originally built on an island just off the mainland and since it was also well fortified, it was considered by many to be impregnable. There was also a city on the mainland from which people could retreat to the island if ever under attack. It was only after the seven month construction of Causeway, constructed using the stones of the demolished mainland city of old Tyre and the use of the largest ever siege towers used in warfare, that Alexander the Great was able to take the city in 332 BC.

During the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Tyre was a tributary of Assyria. After the power of Assyria started to rise again in the region under Tigilath-Pileser III, the Assyrians tried to increase their control over the city. The Assyrians, during the reign of Shalmaneser V, had unsuccessfully besieged the city between 725 BC and 720 BC.

Later it was also besieged by Sennacherib. He did not succeed in taking Tyre but Tyre lost its territories and their king had to flee. From that point, Tyre adopted a pro-Assyrian foreign policy and their king supported Assyria.

Esau-Haddan and Ashurbanipal, who came after Sennacherib and ruled from 680 to 669 BC and 669 to 631 BC respectively, both overcame Tyre and destroyed its wider lands, even though they did not take the city itself. It is most likely that this prophecy relates to the period just before Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem, around 701 BC. The 70 years of Tyre being forgotten mentioned in verse 15 probably refers to the period of tighter Assyrian dominance from that time until the death of Ashurbanipal in 631 BC, after which time the Neo-Assyrian empire started to crumble.

The oracle is framed as a lament over Tyre. Some commentators regard this lament as satirical in character, although considering the fact that Jerusalem was probably hoping that Tyre would be able to help to stem the flow of Assyria in the region, the lament may well have been genuine. The failure of Tyre would have been very bad news for Hezekiah and the rulers of Judah.

The oracle begins by instructing the ships of Tarshish, large mercantile ships with sailors returning to Tyre from Spain, to wail as news that Tyre has fallen reaches them at or from Cyprus. The merchants of Sidon, another great city of Tyre and the Phoenicians, are called to join in the morning. As prosperous traders of Egyptian grain, the Phoenicians were at the heart of international commerce.

Tyre was like the great child of the sea, but now the sea itself is bereft, robbed of its

offspring. News of Tyre's fall spreads throughout the Mediterranean. Egypt laments the cutting off of its commerce and trade, recognising that its own wealth will start to dry up.

Tarshish and peoples in various Phoenician colonies throughout the Mediterranean will also mourn. The once great and rich city of Tyre, which planted colonies all along the coasts, has been humbled. The prophet makes clear that Tyre was not the victim of mere happenstance.

The Lord himself has determined to humble its pride, a recurring theme in the book of Isaiah. The Lord's purposes are over all of the affairs of man, and he alone is the exalted ruler. All others who would lift themselves up will be brought low.

The meaning of verse 10 is difficult to ascertain. It might refer to forsaking trading for farming. Perhaps the claim is that the power of Tyre has been brought low and its former colonies are no longer restrained and could plunder her.

Or it may refer to the fact that they are no longer defended by her. The Lord is the true master of Tyre's fate, has stretched out his hand over her seas, and will shake the earth and bring down Tyre's kingdom. They might flee to Cyprus, as their king historically did, but they will not find rest and security there.

The Lord's hand, through Assyria and other means, will still hang over them. Gary Smith suggests that verse 13 is instructing the people of Tyre to attend to the defeat of Meredith Baladan and the Babylonian rebellion against the Assyrians shortly before this, in 703 BC. Tyre's fate at the hands of the Assyrians would be similar.

Christopher Sights reads the verse very differently, as a claim that it was Babylon, not Assyria, that brought down Tyre, referring it to Babylon's siege of Tyre later on. Verse 13 is a very obscure one. The section ends by returning to its opening summons to the ships of Tarshish to wait for Tyre.

The main section of the oracle is followed by a secondary elaboration of its message. Elsewhere, Jeremiah speaks of 70 years of Babylonian dominance in the region. The 70 years mentioned here is most likely not the same as that of Babylon's dominance.

Rather, it might relate to the period of Assyrian dominance until the death of Ashurbanipal. That said, we are probably justified in recognising the symmetry. Tyre would again be eclipsed during the period of Babylon's dominance.

It is also possible that the 70 years mentioned here is more idiomatic than literal. When the 70 years come to an end, Tyre would be revived and start trying to sell her wares once again as she formerly had. The prophet compares her to a forgotten and perhaps ageing prostitute who is returning to the streets and singing a song in hopes that people will remember her and that she might get some new custom.

Earlier in the oracle, Tyre was described as the merchandise of nations. In her extreme commitment to trade, she herself was being traded so thoroughly was she entangled in her own economy. However, after the period of her suppression, Tyre would rise again.

The Lord, verse 17 puts it, would visit her, language typically used of the Lord's redeeming of his own people. Yet her deliverance would see her return to her prostitution with the nations of the world. Nevertheless, her wealth would end up flowing out of her to the Lord and to his people.

This should be read along with other material in Isaiah speaking of the glorification of Jerusalem and the lifting up of Zion over the nations. Tyre, once the greatest city of maritime trade, would bow to Jerusalem and Tyre's riches would flow up to Zion. A related prophecy can be seen in Isaiah chapter 60, verses 9 to 14.

Day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish. Those nations shall be utterly laid waste.

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the Cyprus, the plain, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary. And I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet.

They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. As Cites and Brevard Charles observe, if Babylon was the greatest city of the earth, Tyre was the greatest city of the seas. Babylon is also the easternmost of the places judged, and Tyre the westernmost.

Beginning the series of oracles against the nations with Babylon and ending it with Tyre suggests the comprehensive character of the judgment of the Lord that is coming upon the face of the earth. A question to consider, how do we see revelation combining the prophetic judgments upon Babylon and Tyre in its description of the judgment upon Babylon the great? Mark chapter 15. And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council.

And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, Are you the king of the Jews? And he answered him, You have said so. And the chief priests accused him of many things.

And Pilate again asked him, Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you. But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked.

And among the rebels in prison who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he

usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews? For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, Then what shall I do with the man you call the king of the Jews? And they cried out again, Crucify him! And Pilate said to them, Why? What evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, Crucify him! So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas. And having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the governor's headquarters. And they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him.

And they began to salute him, head of the Jews. And they were struck with a reed and spitting on him, and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him.

And they crucified him. And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha, which means place of a skull.

And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him.

And the inscription of the charge against him read, The King of the Jews. And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right, and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, Aha, you who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross.

So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, He saved others, he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe. Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? Which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And some of the bystanders hearing it said, Behold, he is calling Elijah. And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was

torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion who stood facing him saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.

There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Younger and of Joses and Salome. When he was in Galilee they followed him and ministered to him. And there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

And when evening had come, since it was the day of preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died, and summoning the centurion he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.

And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

Mark chapter 15 begins with a consultation between the chief priests, the elders, the scribes and the entire Sanhedrin. They then deliver Jesus over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate questions Jesus concerning the charges against him.

The charge that he claims that he is the king of the Jews is the messianic claim as seen from a gentile perspective. Some have suggested that Pilate's question should be read in a sarcastic tone. You are the king of the Jews? Joel Marcus then suggests that Jesus' response to this question is the edgy one.

You are saying it. Such an answer might antagonise him. It presents Pilate himself as bearing witness to Jesus being the king of the Jews.

But beyond this, Jesus doesn't give any more responses to Pilate. Pilate presses him to answer the charges made against him, but Jesus makes no further response. Once again, this is reminiscent of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 7, the lamb who is led to the slaughter who is silent before it shearers.

This is the silence of one who is facing the threat of death and for that reason it's remarkable and Pilate is amazed. One would expect a person in Jesus' position to be doing anything and everything to defend himself, but Jesus is silent. Pilate gives the people the choice between Barabbas and Jesus as the one to be released to them.

Pilate seems to be searching for a means of escape here. He recognises that the chief priests have delivered Jesus up through envy, however he needs to keep the chief priests, the elders and the Sanhedrin on his side, so he needs to condemn Jesus. He also

wants to satisfy the crowd.

Like the Jewish leaders, he fears the crowd and doesn't want to go against it. A customary release of a prisoner seems to offer him an opportunity to get Jesus off without taking responsibility that would render him unpopular. The practice of releasing a prisoner seems to be a strange one and presumably it's not a commitment on the part of the Roman governor so much as an occasional Passover time crowd-pleasing gesture that's snatched at now as a way out of a difficult position.

What it does do is it sets up Barabbas and Jesus as two ways that the people can choose. The choice between Barabbas and Jesus seems to be a choice that shouldn't be a choice at all. Why would they prefer an insurrectionist and a murderer over Jesus who healed the sick and raised the dead? Yet as the chief priests stir up the crowd, this is exactly the way that they choose.

Mark makes certain that we have an idea about what sort of man Barabbas is. Barabbas means son of the father which again invites comparison and contrast with Christ himself as the true son of the father. In choosing Barabbas, the people choose the violent revolutionary over the true messiah and this is a choice that over time would eventually seal their fate in AD 70.

The crowd cry out for Jesus's crucifixion, not just for his condemnation but that he should be put to death in the most grisly way possible. The actions and the description of the crowd here is similar to the way that we find demon-possessed persons described elsewhere in Mark. The crowd are whipped up in a sort of demonic frenzy with the chief priest being involved but behind them I think we can see Satan himself.

Pilate releases Barabbas to the crowd, scourges Jesus and then delivers Jesus up to be crucified. There's a parodic coronation and enthronement that follows. Gentile soldiers, the whole battalion, ridiculing the king of the Jews, gathering as an audience before him, dressing him up with a crown and a scarlet robe.

Now this is appropriate because soldiers recognise kings. Soldiers are the ones that surround kings and express the glory of the rulers of this world and now in a parody of a coronation we're seeing something of the truth of what's taking place. Jesus is the true king and this is his exaltation that's going to happen.

He's going to be lifted up on the cross and then raised to God's right hand. We might also reflect upon the fact that all the other people in this situation, none of them seem to be in control. The chief priests and the scribes are envious of Christ and his influence driven by their passions.

They're also fearful of the crowd as is Pilate who is concerned to pacify them. Pilate also needs to keep the chief priests and the scribes on his side. The crowd is caught up in a

satanic frenzy and paradoxically Jesus, the one who is condemned to crucifixion, seems to be the only one who isn't operating out of his fear and passions.

A passerby called Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the cross for Christ. Simon is a gentile who carries Christ's cross, the very mark of true discipleship. Yet Simon Peter, the chief of the disciples Jesus called and the one who had been given the charge to carry the cross and follow Christ, is nowhere to be found.

Once again we're having a juxtaposition here. We've seen juxtapositions between Christ and Peter, between Jesus and Barabbas and now we're seeing one between Simon of Cyrene and also Peter, Simon Peter. The division of Christ's garments and the casting lots for them again looks back to Psalm 22 verse 18.

They divide my garments among them and for my clothing they cast lots. The voice of scripture is behind the text at many points here and we can hear its voice as the voice of fulfilled prophecy. This is the voice of the Davidic suffering king.

It gives the reader or the hearer a sense of what is taking place in the death of Christ. They crucify him in the third hour around 9am. He's offered myrrh and wine, drugged wine, to dull his awareness of the pain which he refuses.

His refusal of the drugged wine draws our mind back to his statement that he would not drink the fruit of the vine until he drank it new in the kingdom, a sort of Nazarite vow that Christ takes as he goes out to do battle with the evil one. It is also a commitment consciously to bear the pain of the cross, not to shrink away from it in insensibility but to face up to it fully. Finally perhaps we're supposed to see a relationship between Christ not drinking wine and the fact that the priests were not supposed to drink wine while they were on duty in the temple.

Jesus is performing a sacrificial work here and it's important that he does so in his full and right mind. The charge for which he's being crucified is placed above him, that he is the king of the Jews and there are robbers placed on either side of him like people would be on either side of an enthroned king. There's a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12 here that he was numbered with the transgressors.

There's also a continuation of the theme of a parodic enthronement. As people pass by they mock and they wag their heads. Again this looks back to the words of scripture in the past.

Psalm 22 verse 7, once again Psalm 22. All who see me mock me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads. Lamentations chapter 2 verse 15.

All who pass along the way clap their hands at you, they hiss and wag their heads at you. Jesus is ridiculed as the one who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days by the passers-by. He's ridiculed by the chief priests, by the scribes and the elders

as the one who though he saved others cannot save himself.

He is the supposed king of Israel and claims to trust in God but God is not coming to his aid. There's darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock and this progression through hours, the third hour, the sixth hour and the ninth hour, perhaps invites us to see some deeper order in what's taking place and the divine superintention of the crucifixion. Perhaps we could even see it as something akin to trimesters leading to the birth of a new world.

Darkness over the land from noon to three o'clock recalls the final of the cycle of plagues before the death of the firstborn which itself occurred at the darkness of midnight. Once again there's darkness over the land, darkness that reminds us of the exodus and associates Israel with Egypt as it was judged in the plagues and now we have another death of the firstborn, the true firstborn that dies for the people and they were substituted by lambs but this is the true lamb of God and we should be alert to the Passover connotations here because the Passover lamb would be killed around this sort of time. Christ is the true Passover lamb, he's the true firstborn son, he's the one that dies so that the people can be released from slavery, that a new exodus can take place.

Mark has been working with themes of Isaiah and of Isaiah's new exodus throughout and now we maybe see these coming to their full head that this is the time when the exodus is taking place. Christ prepared for the Passover and now he is the Passover lamb being sacrificed. The darkness here could not have been a solar eclipse but it may have been an extreme sandstorm as it was in the case of the exodus or perhaps also it could have been a covering up of the skies with heavy cloud cover.

The darkness at his death contrasts with the light of the dawn that will be associated with his resurrection and the darkness of the day of the Lord is described in the Old Testament. Zephaniah 1 verse 15. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Emos 8 verses 9-10. And on that day declares the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation.

I will bring sackcloth on every waist and baldness on every head. I will make it like the morning for an only sun and the end of it like a bitter day. We have a number of the elements here that appear in the crucifixion of Christ.

As in the prophecy of Emos, it's noon when the sun goes down and the earth is darkened. There's also the death of an only son, the firstborn son of the father. We might also consider the similarities between the description of Jesus' trial, mockery, crucifixion and death and the events described in relation to the events leading up to and in the

destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Jesus is suffering the fate of Jerusalem. He's presenting an alternative for all those who trust in him. At the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with a loud voice, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? These are the first words of Psalm 22, a psalm that's been alluded to or cited on a number of occasions already within this account.

It's a psalm of the suffering Davidic king. The bystanders don't recognize that Jesus is quoting scripture. Like Eli in the temple who couldn't recognize the prayer of Hannah, they can't recognize the voice of scripture and the voice of the Psalms.

They hear but they do not understand. And perhaps there's another irony here as the coming of Elijah was associated with the arrival of the great and terrible day of the Lord in Malachi chapter 4. Jesus is offered sour wine at this point, recalling Psalm 69 verse 21. They gave me poison for food and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

He again cries out with a loud voice and he dies. And the curtain of the temple, the realm of God's dwelling, the very heart of the religious order is torn from top to bottom. It's a sign of God's action.

It's not torn from the bottom to the top but from the realm of God's dwelling from the top. Also it's an anticipation of the fulfillment of Christ's words concerning the temple. This is a tearing in judgment.

It could also be seen as a tearing in mourning. The high priest tore his garments as he was not supposed to do earlier on in outrage at Jesus' blasphemy. But God is tearing the clothes of his tabernacle in mourning for his son.

It's also an opening up of a realm that has been closed off so that people can come into God's special presence. There's debate about which part of the temple this curtain is in. Is it the curtain at the entrance to the temple itself or is it the curtain that is at the entrance of the Holy of Holies? One way or another God is opening up a way for people to come in.

The response of the centurion seeing all of this is to confess that Jesus is the son of God. This is a response of a gentile in faith. Again we might think of Psalm 22.

Psalm 22 27 to 28. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord and all the families of the nations shall worship before you for kingship belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations. Along with the centurion Mark draws our attention to the many women of Jesus' disciples who were present at a distance.

While the male disciples had almost all forsaken him at the end the women remained present and they had ministered to him providing for his needs from Galilee. In Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 3 this ministry of the women is described. Joseph of Arimathea

comes at evening asking for the body of Jesus.

He is a member of the council which is surprising considering the part the council had played in the condemnation of Christ to his death. But there's time pressure here. It's the day before the Sabbath and so they need to bury Christ before the Sabbath begins.

As in the other gospels the presence of two Josephs and two Marys in the account of the burial of Jesus might make us think about Christ's birth and the way in which the tomb can function as a new womb from which Christ will come forth as the firstborn from the dead. The prominence of the women at this point might also add weight to such birth themes. The body is wrapped in a clean linen shroud like the clothes of the high priest would be made of linen on the day of atonement.

It's also a fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 53 verse 9. His grave is made with a rich man at his death. The tomb is cut into the rock like stones taken from the quarry. In Isaiah chapter 51 verse 1, Christ is the great stone that will become the chief cornerstone of the new temple.

So it seems appropriate that in his resurrection he will come from a tomb that has been cut into the rock. The women witness where the burial takes place and so they know where to go on the first day of the week. As in the other gospels, the prominence of the women at this point invites us to reflect upon their model of faith, the way that they remain faithful to Christ and follow him even when the male disciples fall away and are scattered.

A question to consider, what can we learn from the characters of Simon the centurion and Joseph of Arimathea?