

Secret Christians

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As some of you know, I am a retired academic historian, and when I lead the intercessions at our Sunday eucharist I try to say something about the lives of the saints and heroes of the church who are commemorated in the Anglican Church calendar around that day. This morning I would like us to think about the significance in the Christian story of a man we commemorated yesterday, Joseph of Arimathea.

Joseph from Arimathea we meet in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. All that we know of him is that he was a wealthy man and a member of the Jewish council but had taken no part in the condemnation of Jesus. He was 'a good and righteous man', says St Luke, 'looking for the kingdom of God', a disciple of Jesus **but secretly**. After the death of Jesus Joseph bravely asked Pilate for his body and buried it in the tomb that he had prepared for himself, newly hewn in the rock.

Early in the history of the Christian Church Joseph of Arimathea became the subject of legends which reached their peak in the twelfth century – that he was in possession of the holy grail, the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper, and that he had gone to Gaul (France) with the apostle Philip to preach the gospel. Philip had sent him to England and the king who received him gave him an island later called Glastonbury, in Somerset. It was later claimed that Joseph of Arimathea was buried at Glastonbury and that the staff he planted in the ground produced a thorn bush which flowered at Christmas, and so on. Combine these stories with legends about King Arthur that associate him with the same place and you will see why modern Glastonbury is such a popular place for tourists and for those who gravitate to places they see as magical, endowed with supernatural vibes.

Joseph is associated with Nicodemus, an influential Pharisee whom we meet in St John's Gospel. In chapter 3 Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to ask him questions about his teachings, in chapter 7 he speaks up on behalf of Jesus, and in chapter 19 he assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial, binding it up in linen cloths with an expensive mixture of spices that he himself had contributed. One wonders about what happened to these men afterwards but they disappear from the New Testament writings.

Both men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, were disciples of Jesus **in secret**. This idea of the secret followers of Jesus is worth thinking about. There have been many Christians who have made themselves invisible in order to survive. The theologian John Calvin coined the term 'Nicodemites' to refer to them. It was not a compliment. He saw them as cowards, timorous people who refused to stand up and witness to the truth before kings and those in authority. He could point to those words of Jesus (Matthew 10: 33): 'Everyone who acknowledges me before men I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.'

There are many examples of 'Nicodemites' in Christian history. When the Christian Church began to persecute heretics – those it regarded as holding erroneous beliefs and therefore sought to exterminate – to avoid death, the so-called heretics had a habit of conforming outwardly but still holding their views. They held the faith within their families and remained in contact with like-minded people through secretive networks. In England for example there were the Lollards, the followers of the fourteenth-century heretic John Wycliffe who survived in some places for 150 years. In those parts of Europe and the Middle East where militant Islam overran the early Christian communities and imposed mass conversions there were many crypto-Christians in Syria and Turkey and Cyprus and other regions who outwardly conformed to Islam but managed to

survive by practising their faith in private, in their own households.

During the English Reformation of the sixteenth century that minority of the population that persisted in their loyalty to the Pope rather than accepting the monarch as the head of the church managed to survive as an underground Roman Catholic network under the protection of gentry or aristocratic families. Their big houses provided space for secret chapels and places to shelter visiting priests.

There were secret Christians in Stalin's Russia when his persecution of the church was at its peak in the 1930s. In China, Christians learnt to hide during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Since then, Christianity has been tolerated and the major denominations are recognised by the government; they are the only authorised Christian churches. However, it is estimated that tens of millions of Chinese Christians – some say the majority of them – do not identify with what they see as government-controlled churches. They prefer to worship in small groups, meeting in private houses as unregistered gatherings, and keep a low profile. The government of course knows who they are but occasionally, to make life uncomfortable, they might get a visit from the police, or someone gets arrested for infringing a government regulation or other offence.

How did these secret Christians sustain their faith over time? This is an important question but often hard to answer because secret groups by definition tend not to leave much (or anything) in the way of records. For Protestant Christians underground it was the Bible and well-known psalms and hymns. For Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians underground it was prayer books, liturgical texts, holy pictures, icons for the Orthodox, the rosary for Catholics. And sometimes they might get a visit from a priest in disguise to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments.

So Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as secret followers of Jesus had many successors. Most of us would not seek martyrdom. At a time of persecution we would all want to survive if we had a chance, and probably we would learn to compromise and lie low. We should honour those who have maintained their Christian faith underground.

Obviously if all Christians had been secret and kept their faith to themselves the Christian Church would never have got off the ground. It would have withered and died. On the other hand, those underground Christians over the centuries have displayed great courage in just holding on, in very hostile environments. They kept their eyes on Jesus. They remembered his teaching, in today's gospel, that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. They absorbed St Paul's words in his letter to the Colossians that we heard this morning: 'Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.'