

Secret Disciples

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Martha Mary Chapel at the Wayside Inn

John 19.38-42 (NRSV)

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

ONE: Nicodemus and Joseph

Let's think for a few moments about Nicodemus and Joseph, secret disciples. You remember Nicodemus. He is a Pharisee, an important member of the Sanhedrin, who came to Jesus under cover of darkness. Nicodemus thought it was better to be at least fairly safe than to be sorry, so he waited till he thought his neighbors were all asleep. When he asked Jesus what he was teaching, the Lord said it all boiled down to being born again.

Nicodemus was incredulous. How could that happen, Nicodemus wanted to know, when you were already pushing sixty-five and had a hard time just getting out of bed in the morning?

I like the way Frederick Buechner, in his book *Peculiar Treasures*, contemporized Jesus' response to Nicodemus. "A gust of wind happened to whistle down the chimney at that point, making the dying embers burst into flame, and Jesus said being born again was like that. It wasn't something you did. The wind did it. The Spirit did it. It was something that happened, for God's sake."¹

"How can this be?" Nicodemus wonder. How indeed?

It can be only by the Spirit of God. And the Spirit quickened Nicodemus enough that later on, when Jesus was dead, he went along with Joseph to pay his last respects at the tomb. It was a crazy thing to do, but he decided it was more than worth it. So Nicodemus, no longer a secret disciple, walked along in broad daylight to take care of the funeral arrangements. He was hauling a hundred pounds of spice, enough to bury three or four kings. Maybe he had been afraid to speak out before. But not now. Jesus' death had changed all of that.

Then there was Joseph of Arimathea. He too was a wealthy and respected member of the Sanhedrin. He too had followed Jesus secretly, preferring the closet because he had been afraid of the consequences. We know less about Joseph than about Nicodemus. Joseph's only appearance in the New Testament is here making arrangements for the funeral. Nonetheless, it took a good deal of courage to ask Pilate for the body.² It was Roman custom to leave corpses on their crosses for several

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 122-123.

² Buechner, 79. "As a prominent member of the Jewish establishment, Joseph of Arimathea needed guts to go to Pilate and ask for the dead body of Jesus so he could give it a decent burial. It is presumably no easier for a closet

days as grim warnings to other would-be offenders. But Joseph asked Pilate to forego the custom this one time. Then he and Nicodemus took the body to a new tomb. When Jesus was born a Joseph watched over him. Now in his death, another Joseph watched over to make certain all was done the way it should be and with proper dignity and respect.

TWO: Accepting the death of Jesus

There is a certain poignancy in Nicodemus and Joseph finally coming out of their closets only when Jesus was dead. One wonders if either of them had spoken up during the Sanhedrin debates that condemned Jesus to death. Did they at the very least raise a protest at the injustice being done? Did they somehow signal to Jesus that they didn't go along with all the other condemning voices? Sometimes it's easy to pay tribute in death. Did they offer any tribute in life?

Yet to their credit, the death of Jesus did for them what even his life did not. They finally came forward to be counted on the Lord's side in a way no one could mistake. Let the chips fall where they may now. It was a time to choose. By declaring their faith they began to fulfill a prophecy Jesus had made concerning his death. Jesus had predicted his death by saying, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12.32) Within the hour that he died, Joseph and Nicodemus were first. They began the centuries' long procession to the cross of Christ as he, indeed, draws all people to himself. At least in death Joseph and Nicodemus paid Jesus tribute.

By doing so they remind us that we need to accept the *death* of Jesus. It is amazing how often down through the centuries various theories have been put forth suggesting that Jesus really didn't die.³ Some have said he swooned, later to be revived by the sweet smelling spices and the coolness of the tomb. Others have said he was in some kind of trance.

All such silly notions come from an unwillingness to face the fact that God's Son really died and from a fear to face death itself. There has always been a certain way of thinking that doesn't want to let God get too close to the really grim details of human life. God is too spiritual to touch the fleshly, material realities of our world. In the ancient world such a view was called gnosticism. It basically believed that spirit was good and matter was bad and they couldn't really mix. So Jesus, coming from the realm of the spirit, never really was a fully human person. Obviously, then, he couldn't die a real death. He only appeared to die.

But Joseph and Nicodemus were not deceived. Through their solicitude in making funeral arrangements, John tells us that the real body of the real Jesus was really dead. If Jesus wasn't really dead, then none of what he came to do makes any sense. It is only through the death of Jesus that we can have any hope and a fake death would make a false hope for it would place a deception at the

Christian to come out of the closet than it is for anybody else, and you can't help admiring him for it. In view of the events of Easter morning, however, you can't help noting that if he'd only waited a few days, he could have spared himself a thumping bill from the undertaker."

³ Earl F. Palmer, *The Intimate Gospel: Studies in John* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978) 164. "All New Testament writers insist that Jesus really died — that his humiliation was complete. It is part of their affirmation over against the protognostic spiritualization of Jesus into a holy representative who is not fully human and therefore does not really die but only appears to die. It may be possible that at the time of John's writing of the Gospel he is aware of these protognostic teachings, and therefore we have this eye-witness verification of the humanity of Jesus. It is as important to John that Jesus is flesh as it is to him that Jesus is ultimate Word."

very center of Christian belief.⁴ Hope comes when first we accept the real death of the real Jesus.

Conclusion

Despite this there is a certain tendency in some places to put so much emphasis on what we will celebrate on Sunday that the crucifixion gets lost in the light of Easter. Certainly without Easter our faith would be in vain as St. Paul said long ago.⁵ But Easter without the cross is little more than a magic show. It is little better than ancient gnosticism. It doesn't let God really get close enough to earth to really die. But Jesus, who was God incarnate, really died. John wants us to be sure of that.

So we must not try to detour around Good Friday to get to Easter. There is no detour, just as there is no detour around our own death or the deaths of those whom we love. But the death of Jesus says there is hope for he already knows what our dying is like. Johann Sebastian Bach said as much in the great chorus from his Passion according to St. Matthew.

Ah! Golgotha? unhappy Golgotha!
 The Lord of Glory here beneath a curse is lying;
 He hangs upon the accursed tree,
 Who shall the world's Redeemer be;
 The Lord who heaven and earth created
 By earth is now reviled and hated;
 The sinless, lo, for sin is dying;
 With stricken soul the sight I see.

Dear friends, in that sight is our greatest hope.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 18-19. "Two of the noblest pillars of the ancient world-Roman law and Jewish piety — together supported the necessity of putting Jesus Christ to death in a manner that even for its day was peculiarly loathsome. Thus the cross stands for the tragic folly of men not just at their worst but at their best.

"Jesus needn't have died. Presumably he could have followed the advice of friends like Peter and avoided the showdown. Instead he chose to die because he believed that he had to if the world was to be saved. Thus the cross stands for the best that men can do as well as for the worst.

"For those who believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead early on a Sunday morning the conclusion is inescapable that he came out somehow the winner. What emerged from his death was a kind of way, of truth, of life, without which the last two thousand years of human history would be even more unthinkable than they are.

"A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus-the symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. It suggests, at the very least, hope."

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15.16-19: For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.