

St. Joseph of Arimathea

When I set out to write about St. Joseph of Arimathea I started with a document that I found amongst my fathers many files, labeled St Joseph of Arimathea. It was an old, typed document that I believe came from the centennial celebration of the construction of our church in 1983. Much of what I found with further research was a crisscross of legends and writings from the last 2000 years. I like to think that the majority of the following is true.

All 4 Gospels identify Joseph of Arimathea as the biblical figure who assumed responsibility for the burial of Jesus after the crucifixion. Matthew 27 describes Joseph simply as a rich man and disciple of Jesus, but according to Mark 15, Joseph of Arimathea was "a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God". Luke 23 adds that he "had not consented to their decision and action".

According to John 19, upon hearing of Jesus' death, this secret disciple of Jesus "asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission." Joseph immediately purchased a linen shroud and proceeded to Golgotha to take the body of Jesus down from the cross. There, Joseph and Nicodemus took the body and bound it in linen cloths with the spices (myrrh and aloes) that Nicodemus had brought. The disciples then conveyed the prepared corpse to a man-made cave hewn from rock in a garden nearby. The Gospel of Matthew alone suggests that this was Joseph's own tomb.

Joseph fled with a party of about a dozen persons including his son Josephes. They headed by ship for Gaul (now France) and by luck their almost disabled boat eventually drifted into Marseilles. Other Christians were there before they arrived, most notably the apostle Philip. Joseph's group is referred to in various records as the Bethany group and they were warmly welcomed.

Legend has it that the Christian enclave in Gaul was visited by emissaries from Druidic religion in England who had heard about "The Way" and wanted to have it explained further. It was decided that Joseph of Arimathea should head the party of Christians bound for England and it is written in some sources that Philip consecrated Joseph for this task. The party bound for England also had about a dozen persons, and when they arrived they were referred to not as Christians, but as "Culdees." Some think that Culdee means "a certain stranger" and others think the word means "servant of the lord."

When Joseph's group reached England they sailed up the Severn Sea until they saw a lofty green hill which is known to this day as Glastonbury Tor. They landed and climbed the hill. Tradition (or legend) has it that Joseph, weary from his travel, stopped to rest and as he did he thrust his staff into the ground where it took root and in time blossomed. Historically it is known as the "Holy Thorn." The unusual feature of the Glastonbury Thorn was that it bloomed both at Easter and Christmastime. The spot where Joseph thrust his staff into the ground has since been called WearyAll Hill. This area of Glastonbury has long been associated with the legend of King Arthur. Some claim that the hill of Glastonbury Tor is the legendary island of Avalon from Arthurian legends.

The local prince welcomed the Christian missionaries to the extent of bestowing on them a gift of 12 hides of land (about 1920 acres) and the parcel became the site of the first Christian church in England, later of a renowned monastery.

Medieval interest in Joseph centered on two main themes, that of Joseph as the founder of British Christianity (even before it had taken hold in Rome), and that of Joseph as the original guardian of the Holy Grail. Legend also claims that Joseph of Arimathea was the first keeper of the Holy Grail. It is said that Joseph received the Grail from an apparition of Jesus and it was sent with him and his followers to Britain.

Medieval interest in genealogy raised claims that Joseph was a relative of Jesus; specifically, Mary's uncle, or according to some genealogies, Joseph's uncle.

It was reported that Joseph of Arimathea died at the age of 86, and six kings carried his body in the funeral. Joseph of Arimathea is venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. He remains the patron saint of morticians and undertakers.

Our church has been blessed with several Glastonbury Thorn trees over the years. In 1958, 2 Glastonbury Thorns owned by the church were moved from the Bronx Botanical Gardens and planted in the church grounds. More recently, in 1983, Rev Chris Saralis from Somerset England brought 2 more Glastonbury Thorns from England that were also planted on the property. To the best of my knowledge we have one thorn left on the property, on the left side of the entrance to the Labyrinth. The ashes of Rev. Walter McNeeley, our founding rector of 39 years, are interred beneath the Glastonbury thorn.