

The Secret Holders and Bearers

Have you ever been told a secret, maybe it went – don't tell anyone else this but.....?

Have you ever had a secret of your own?

Maybe an exciting secret, like you have booked a surprise holiday for someone as a treat and you don't want them to guess.

Maybe it's a dark and terrible secret that you would want no one absolutely no one to know.

Let me share a little light hearted secret with you now.

Later there's going to be refreshments with really posh biscuits – not rich tea, really posh, chocolate hobnobs and jammy dodgers. Mm. Well, by the chocolate hobnobs there's going to be a sign which says, 'take only one, God is watching. Well.... I can now tell you that you can take as many jammy dodgers as you want... because.... God is watching the hobnobs!'

Mark's gospel has some intriguing secrets all the way through.

Whoever was the nameless woman who poured expensive ointment on Jesus and should be remembered every time the good news is told, yet, remains anonymous?

What was the identity of the young man in the white loin cloth who was grabbed at the arrest of Jesus but escaped by wriggling out of his cloth and then ran away shamefully naked?

Was this the same young man in white later at the tomb of Jesus, who so terrifies the women into silence?

All the time we are guessing who Jesus really was and is and finding out who knows and doesn't know, who are the insiders and who are the outsiders, and whether we all change over time in seeing things, seeing the human and divine encounter from the perspective of inside and outside?

I guess this is the challenge of all of us concerned with inclusion not only within the nature and practice of church but also within the wider vision of the kingdom or even KIN DOM. The very word inclusion implies there are some still struggling with exclusion, very often people of anonymity, of silent, secret lives that daily bear the cost of past and present abuse and hurt. All of us, I guess, at some time or another, have come across such people; many of us might have experienced ourselves the aching abyss of such silence. So our story we share with you today is in no way an exclusive story, it is a living expression, I hope, of two travellers who work beyond the boundaries of only one definition of church but who feel strongly, in the words of Andre Gide, that new lands are discovered only if we lose sight of the shore, even though we might have some idea of where the shore still is!

Community Mental health chaplaincy is about travelling very privileged and sometimes distant journeys and about sharing sacred, enigmatic, and paradoxical spaces. We travel theological pathways of cosmic mileage with people who are both insiders and outsiders. People who have spent many months and often years of their lives inside locked, chaotic, often bedlam –like psychiatric wards and inside a chaotic, or even colourful cosmos of secret visions, inside silent and solitary cells of profound depression and anxiety or deafening dwellings of controlling or cajoling voices. (These are places where both Christopher and Mary, in their own unique ways, have personally and experientially found themselves, inside these bedlam - like dwelling places of fearful, insistent voices). That is why, perhaps, we are so passionate about, and so tentative amongst such wounded lives. Here are the secret-holders, the secret-bearers, who not only on

behalf of themselves but also on behalf of us all, bear secrets which torture when told and are torturous to hear. Yet hear we must. Secrets of childhood and life-long trauma, violence, sexual and emotional abuse, shared by those who in deep self blaming shame often perceive rejection and punishment by God and God's people or have intimate and unique experiences of God and godding.

Time and time again because of their secrets and their 'differences' – their 'difference' is often ignored and feared- they remain outside of society, frequently outside of common language, discourse and understanding, outside the library, outside the cinema, outside Wetherspoons and outside our churches. Can we offer sanctuary, a place where we make worth ship and theology together, an embracing and honouring of these secrets, whether remaining hidden or painfully shared and can we offer acceptance, love, listening ears or holding hands or silent sitting alongside? Are we prepared to be changed, transformed, outraged, and can the secret-holders enable our secrets to be borne more gently, even if they need to remain hidden for a while? Can we bear to hear when the practices and the theologies heard in some churches have not contributed to the empowerment of lives and voices but to their continuing silence? Even where genuine expressions of compassion and pastoral care have embedded the idea of 'victim' rather than the radical Gospel idea of partner and co- theological agents?

Our worlds, not us and them, are sacred spaces, where sadly too few dare to step over the threshold and many who do take that step, lumber powerfully in, forgetting that in the sacred space of another, you remove your shoes.

So let us, barefoot, be invited to tip toe over threshold of the sacred space of Linda, (and her community of the Buddha, Jesus, Devil, Big Ben) of Sweet Pea, (crowning herself with a plastic grown gleaming with a plastic ruby because she felt God had been absent in crowning her and wore it proudly to church) of Michael (and his personal experience the crown of thorns) Pat (expressing most justly her wrath and indignation against God) and Colin of the tic tacs (the only gift he had to offer at Communion).

Let's hear their words and attend afresh to our own and let's attend to our liturgical language, see again the symbolism and architecture of our services and hear the clamour and the whispers, the invitations and the barriers that inhabit the theology in our liturgy and hymns. I am not saying that the brief account of these liturgical examples are wholly problematic but they are an example of a presently largely cataphatic liturgy with very little liturgy of lamentation and an apophatic perspective that speaks so much of human experience and especially the lived reality of those with long term and abiding mental health issues:

Just some examples from the present Common Worship Order 1 Service for Holy Communion:

Confession Prayer: We have wounded your love and marred your image in us (so many secret holders bear the woundedness that is wholly the responsibility of others and blame themselves throughout their lives and have been forced to blame themselves, lives overwhelmed by guilt. We tentatively suggest that such a statement echoes the feelings they already have about themselves, 'knowing' they are wholly unworthy of any kind of love, let alone the love of God).

... **Lead us out from darkness to walk as children of light** (on the face of it, who could argue with such a sentiment? However it represents a larger problem with the 'darkness' imaginary that suffuses Christian liturgy and theology. So many of us, in so many different ways, have found the metaphor of darkness wholly positive and therapeutic and the prospect of light almost unbearable at times. We need to look again at these intimately related metaphors.)

Prayer before Distribution: We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs... (We know this is an optional prayer but nevertheless, and because it has been taken wholly out of context from a biblical story which effectively says the opposite, a sense of unworthiness just before we break bread together is, for all of us, and especially for those who live every day with an overwhelming and unbearable sense of unworthiness, wholly unfortunate directly before the gathering at the feast. We **are** worthy, all of us; we **do not have** sinful bodies but beautiful bodies and minds. Neither of us, personally, has been able to say these words for a long time because of our own inner battle with a sense of unworthiness imposed upon us by others).

Dear Lord and Father....re-clothe us in our rightful minds (we shall leave that with you).

We are only inviting all of us to take heed of what we say, as a community of faith, and how these words might, we only say might, be heard by others as they travel their particular paths in and through light and darkness, darkness and light?

What do the words we use together say to the secret holders, are they inviting them inside and through those words and theirs are we being helped to respond to their invitation to step outside?

And inside and outside, wherever we find ourselves on the pathway and on the landscape either side and whosoever we find next to us, in the divine/human dance, may our hearts burn within us as we walk and talk beside each other, tending gently to the secrets we bear and empowering different and diverse unheard voices and lives to be heard and lived in justice and hope and flourishing.

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