

Joseph of Arimethaea,

Observed 1 August

Joseph of Arimethaea is one of the many biblical characters whose name is known by everyone, but whose life and character are largely unknown. Because he is mentioned in all four Gospels as having taken Jesus' body for burial (a privilege normally allowed only to close family members) and placed it in his own new tomb, Joseph's memory has an aura of great importance. The Gospels indicate that he was wealthy and important within the Jewish community (possibly a member of the Sanhedrin). John tells us that he was secretly a disciple and links him with Nicodemus. Not surprisingly legends amplifying these scant few facts have attached to him since the second century. He appears in several of the apocryphal writings that were not accepted into the New Testament canon and is mentioned by all of the most prominent early church historians (including Irenaeus in the second century and Eusebius in the fourth). In our time he is best known for his association with the Arthurian legends of Britain – as the one who brought to England the Holy Grail. Early histories make it clear that Christianity came to the British Isles by the end of the third century, perhaps as early as the beginning of the second. Medieval legends connect Joseph of Arimethaea with this, making him the first apostle to Britain and its first bishop. In these legends he is the founder of Glastonbury Abbey, which remains a major focus of devotion to ancient Christianity in Britain. It is to Glastonbury he is said to have taken the Grail (in this legend the cup used at the Last Supper). This story is part of the great chivalric cycle of stories centered on King Arthur (said in some sources to be a descendant of this Joseph.) In addition to the Grail, Joseph is said to have left a miraculous tree at Glastonbury, the beloved Glastonbury Thorn, said to have spontaneously taken root and burst into leaf when Joseph stuck his walking stick in the ground. This tree helped to make Glastonbury a major site of medieval pilgrimage. The town dates back to the bronze age and the Abbey was one of the most important monasteries of medieval England. The venerated Glastonbury Thorn was cut down by the Puritans during the English Civil War – and a new sprig was planted in the old place in the mid 20th century. There have always been examples of this species of hawthorn unique to the immediate area around Glastonbury. Whatever one may choose to believe from the rich mythology, Joseph of Arimethaea remains for all time an example of faithfulness and courage in a time of overwhelming grief and danger, when the majority of Jesus' faithful followers were hiding in despair and fear for their personal survival.

Lessons Genesis 23:3-9; Psalm 16:5-11; James 1:17-18; Luke 23:50-56

Collect Merciful God, whose servant Joseph of Arimathaea with reverence and godly fear prepared the body of our Lord and Savior for burial, and laid it in his own tomb: Grant to us, your faithful people, grace and courage to love and serve Jesus with sincere devotion all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.