

Can You Keep A Secret?

Mark 7:31-37

11th Sunday in Pentecost

8th August 2010

“Two little men in a flying saucer, Flew round the world one day, Looked to left and right of it, Couldn’t stand the sight of it, And quickly flew away.” So sang Ella Fitzgerald back in 1951.¹

Do you believe in flying saucers or Unidentified Flying Objects as they are better known? From reports this week, it appears that former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, certainly did. According to thousands of recently-released declassified files on UFOs, Churchill was seemingly intrigued by one particular sighting during the 2nd World War. “The incident allegedly involved an RAF reconnaissance plane returning from a mission to France or Germany towards the end of the war,” says one writer, “It was over or near the English coastline when it was suddenly intercepted by a strange metallic object which matched the aircraft’s course and speed for a time before accelerating away and disappearing.” The crew were able to take photographs and supply drawings of the craft afterwards.

Churchill was so convinced of the reality of this extra-terrestrial encounter that he decided that it had to be kept secret. “This event should be immediately classified,” he ordered, “since it would create mass panic amongst the general population and destroy one’s belief in the church.”² (Aha! Now we know why the church has been losing ground in past times. It’s all the fault of flying saucers!)

One person who, over the years, knew about this secret UFO sighting was the grandson of one of Churchill’s security detail, an RAF officer. Seemingly the man overheard Churchill talking about it with General Eisenhower and, later in life, passed knowledge of the conversation on to his family. This man’s grandson, now a physicist, has campaigned for some time to have the UK government release these files so that this story could be made known. But he felt he could not share the secret until it came through official channels.³

Others, of course, have a less patriotic attitude to secrets held in official government files. Just within the past two weeks, some 90,000 classified documents have been released by the WikiLeaks website giving details of the way the war is being conducted in Afghanistan – as well as casting doubts about Pakistan’s total commitment to fighting against the Taliban, seemingly showing that some intelligence agents are working on both sides of this war.

Why, one wonders, would anyone want to bring all these classified documents into the public domain? I suppose there are those who feel that governments should not keep so many secrets. And that’s a good argument because many governments – even those here in Canada, believe it or not! – are overly secretive about those things that do not necessarily need to be kept secret. Where the

WikiLeaks website is concerned, probably it wants to make a name for itself, raise its profile and so make a lot of money. Then, there are activists who want to use such leaked documents to drum up anti-war sentiment and make the case for ending the war in Afghanistan immediately. And, though there is good reason to continue the mission in Afghanistan, there is also a good case for bringing the troops home and not endangering the life of another young man or woman serving in that far-off country. So one can appreciate, though not necessarily approve of, the different reasons for releasing the documents

Why, though, would a serving army officer – and we are led to believe that it is a young man, Private Bradley Manning, who is involved – want to do something like this? Why would he want to smuggle such documents out and risk charges of contravening the official secrets act if not treason? Why would he do this? Especially when the release of such classified material seemingly puts at risk many serving intelligence agency personnel as well as important Afghani and Pakistani information sources.⁴

One wonders, at the same time, why there has been so little public outrage against Bradley Manning in the US over his radical compromise of intelligence data. Compare, for instance, the outcry against former BP chief executive, Tony Hayward, in recent weeks. He was branded as public enemy No 1 for his failures over the Gulf oil spill and would probably have been “lynched” if people had managed to lay hands on him. Why, then, one wonders, is there not the same level of anger against someone who has done such grave harm to that nation’s intelligence interests? Interesting to see the different ways in which various people are treated in the media!

In trying to determine, though, why people such as this would want to release these kinds of classified documents, perhaps it comes down, at the end of the day, to a matter of human nature. It’s something we learned in childhood. How delightful it is to have secrets. Especially being able to divulge them. Don’t we just love having the power of revelation? Possessing that piece of information or gossip no-one else knows about? And how we enjoy releasing that knowledge at just the right time to amaze, or impress or embarrass others – or to enhance our popularity, or to make money.

The people of New Testament times were no better at keeping secrets than we are today. Time and again, Jesus warned those he healed – like the deaf and dumb man in today’s story from Mark – not to tell the secret of what he had done or who he was. But hardly were the words out of his mouth, than the news swept through the local community. The people heard his words and promptly

disobeyed him. They just couldn't wait to get out and spread the message boldly and openly, telling everyone and anyone the great things Jesus was doing.⁵

Isn't it strange that the more Jesus told his followers to keep things secret, the more they went out and told everyone far and wide? Today, by contrast, the more we contemporary Christians are told to keep the secret about Jesus, the more we obey. And we obey willingly. We are only too glad to keep our faith safe and secure within our hearts and within the four walls of our church. No problem at all! We may have difficulties keeping all the rest of Jesus' commandments but this is one we follow to the very letter.

Now, as a minister of the Gospel, I should not be telling you this. But I think, in the interests of Christianity in today's world, you need to hear it. Disobey Jesus on this issue! Do the reverse of what the Master says. Follow the lead of the people in 1st century Galilee. Go out and tell everyone you can about Jesus and his wonderful works. Go out and spread far and wide what he is doing in the world today. Don't keep it inside. Let it flow!

It never fails to amaze me that we will share enthusiastically almost anything in our lives except our faith in Jesus Christ, or our experience as Christians, or our love for the church. If we find a good restaurant, we commend it endlessly to all and sundry. If we get a good deal buying a car, we talk up a storm about the dealer. If we find a good website, we avidly send it to everyone on the internet. If we have had a good night out at a concert, we eagerly spread the news and tell everyone what they missed. But when it comes to our Christian faith and the church, we clam up and keep it under wraps. Wild horses won't drag our faith out of us.

There was an interesting story on CBS the other day about a young woman working in a cell phone store down in Pompano Beach, Florida, who became alarmed when she spotted a rather suspicious-looking man entering the store wearing a hoodie. Sure enough, when he came up to the counter, he produced a gun and attempted to rob her. But the girl kept calm and did the craziest of things. She started telling him about her Christian faith. How God loved her and Jesus had saved her. And she told him that God loved him too. That she would help him come to know Jesus and that she would help him change his ways. The thief was so surprised – or so moved – by the way she spoke of her faith that he abandoned the robbery, apologised, and left the store.⁶

Oh, if only we Christians could talk about our faith in the much less threatening, ordinary, situations of our everyday lives! But we don't. We are very hesitant about doing this. Which is all very well but we have to realise that it's because of this guarded approach to sharing our Christian secret that our faith has become so ineffective in recent years. It's because we are so embarrassed by our religious affiliation that Christianity is treated as irrelevant

by the majority of people in our land. It's because of our reluctance to promote the Christian cause, the church has failed to grow.

How different it was during those times in history when people enthusiastically spread the secret around, then the church grew like a firestorm. When people joyfully shared the Good News, Christianity was a force to be reckoned with throughout the whole world.

Of course, it can be like this again, if only we Christian people will unabashedly spread forth the secret. And we don't need to be pushy in-your-face evangelicals to do it. We don't need to stand on a soap-box at the street-corner. All we need to do is quietly and sincerely share our faith. Tell a friend how God has helped us. Show how God is working in our world today. Engage in practical acts of compassion. Carry out random acts of Christian love. Or, just simply show one other person how important the things of faith are to us and how they have changed our lives for the better.

I wonder if you have ever noticed a little announcement often found in the classifieds in the newspapers. It is typically a request from a devout Roman Catholic to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, for an answer to prayer. And the announcement adds three words, "Promise to publish". Which means that, when they receive the requested help, they will make it widely known how their prayers have been fulfilled and so inspire others to have faith.⁷

Maybe all of us Christians, rather than keep our faith secret, should undertake a similar "Promise to Publish". Publish not just what a saint has done but what God has done so that the wonder of his love may be more fully known. So that his son, Jesus, may be more greatly glorified. So that his church may go from strength to strength. And his kingdom grow throughout the world.

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Ella Fitzgerald, "Two Little Men in a Flying Saucer", Miss Ella's Playhouse, Verve, 2008

² Andrew Hough, Peter Hutchison, "UFO Files", The Daily Telegraph, 5 August 2010

³ "Churchill and Eisenhower agreed to cover up", The Daily Mail Online, 5 August 2010

⁴ David Kerley, Mallory Thompson "Pentagon Scrambles to Protect Sources from Taliban Revenge", ABC News July 31, 2010

⁵ Mark 7:31-37

⁶ Carlin deGuerin Miller, "Jesus Saves: Attempted Robbery Foiled when Clerk Brings Up Christianity", CBS News, July 30, 2010

⁷ Stephanie Levitz, "Thankyous to a saint: a public and private tradition", <http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/studentwork/cns/2003-05-23/280.asp>