

Sermon on 22 July 2018 – Feast of St Mary Magdalene
By The Reverend Colin James – All Saints Church Wokingham
The readings were 2 Corinthians 5.14-17 and John 20.1-2,11-18

“Mary...” With a single word Jesus changes absolutely everything. Her name spoken with such love, such tenderness, such promise and such power. Once she had “known him from a human point of view”. Now she knows him “no longer in that way.” She may no longer hold on to him because “everything old has passed away.” This is more than just a turning point in Mary’s life. It’s the crucial turning point in the history of humanity. “If anyone is Christ,” says St Paul, “there is a new creation”, “everything has become new!”

God’s rule, which Jesus brings us, has been successfully passed from him into the life of another person. Now Mary Magdalene has received it the way is open for everyone to do so. Now Jesus entrusts her with the task of sharing her life changing experience. “Go to my brothers and tell that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.” Still aglow with her encounter she blurts out the good news, “I have seen the Lord.” Faced with their slowness to believe she goes on to tell them the things Jesus has said to her. She is not to hold on to him; nor must they. The role of Mary Magdalene at this pivotal moment in human history could hardly be greater. So who is this woman who receives it? We need first to look briefly at who she isn’t. She was for centuries the victim of a mis-reading, wilful or otherwise, of what scripture says about her.

This is the suggestion that she was ever a prostitute. The Bible never says she was. It arises from confusing two stories appearing in consecutive chapters of Luke. (7 and 8) If they were meant to refer to the same woman, it’s unthinkable that Luke would not himself have made the connection. He doesn’t. Doubtless it suited the agenda of some men to discredit a woman who was clearly so close to Jesus. And then the person responsible for adding a impression of authority to this falsehood was Pope Gregory I. Serious scholars have long since rejected the slanderous claim.

And then, in common with other gospel figures, Mary Magdalene’s been the object of invention, false legend and far fetched claims. She appears in some of the apocryphal writings rejected by the church as it came to discern which documents were of God and which weren’t. It’d be tedious, confusing and give them a credibility they don’t deserve to go through all of them now. But we all know about those who’ve made a fortune out of novels and films which exploit all this nonsense, and in particular the claim that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were ever married and had children.

Back to the four gospels and what they tell us about her. Mary was a common name at the time and the Bible mentions several of them, sometimes in ways which make it difficult know precisely which one we’re talking about. “Our” Mary is unique in being identified not by a family connection, but by the place she came from, Magdala. This had been an important Galilean trading town with a cosmopolitan population, about six miles from Capernaum and twenty from Nazareth.

Mary Magdalene appears in all four gospels as one of a group of women who followed Jesus, probably from very early in his mission. They were presumably relatively well off since they supported him from their own resources. They were said to have been cured of evil spirits and ailments. Mary herself had been freed from seven demons and was doubtless both grateful and devoted to her deliverer. (Lk 8.2) Her devotion exceeds that of the male disciples when she stays close by as Jesus is crucified. She observes where his body is laid and prepares spices for its embalming once the Sabbath rest is over.

The gospels differ about which women go to the tomb on Easter morning, but she is always one of them. Indeed John's gospel, from which our reading came, suggests that she was the only one.

We don't know when or who it was wrote the longer of the two passages added to the mysterious ending to Mark's gospel. So we can't know how much authority to give to it. But of all the available accounts of what happened, it's the one which most closely resembles John's, and in which Mary Magdalene comes alone to the tomb. It says, "Now after (Jesus) rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it." (Mk 16.9-11)

We don't regard the later, apocryphal gospels which were discovered in the 19th or even 20th centuries as holy scripture. But in them we find evidence of how men started to close ranks against women. In the Gospel of Thomas we read "Simon Peter said to (the disciples), 'Let Mary (Magdalene) leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she may become a living spirit resemble-ing you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'"(114 'The Other Gospels' ed Ron Cameron 37)

Shocking stuff with no parallels in our Bible. But in the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene) we find Andrew and Peter arguing with Mary, "Surely (Jesus) did not speak with a woman without our knowledge and not openly. Are we to turn about and all listen to her?" Mary defends herself and says, "Do you suppose that I devised this alone in my heart or that I am deceiving the Saviour?" At least Levi strongly supports her. "Peter, you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you are arguing with a woman as if she were an adversary. If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us." ("Mary Magdalene" by Esther de Boer pp 85-86) So we see that the movement to discredit Mary Magdalene started a long way back and may indeed even have included Jesus' own disciples. The unwillingness of men to regard women as equals, and who resent the fact that a woman might even be loved more than them, clearly goes back a very long way. Though in fairness we should remember that this was certainly part of the culture in which they had been brought up from childhood.

But our Bible shows that Jesus had a totally different attitude towards women. There's not time to recall now all the evidence. But one example, again from John's gospel, demonstrates it beyond doubt. I'm thinking of the Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at

the well, breaking all the social conventions of his day, and what his disciples think is proper. The really significant thing about this is that she goes and calls the people to “come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. Could this be the Messiah?”, she asks. (4.29 RNJB) So at both ends of his gospel John shows us a woman witnessing to Jesus and how he changes her life.

On her feast day let's thank God for Mary Magdalene, and with her for all the women who've ever shared their love of Jesus with us and thereby changed our lives.

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