

Sermon Mary Mag 2018

Mary Magdalene's story is intimately linked with Jesus'. And nothing shows this more than in the resurrection encounters of the gospels.

When Jesus is crucified by the Romans, Mary Magdalene was there supporting him in his final terrifying moments and mourning his death. She also discovers the empty tomb, and she's a witness to the resurrection. She was there at the beginning of a movement that was going to transform the West.

But the Mary Magdalene that lives in our memories is quite different. In art such as Maria Magdalena by Honore Daumier (1808-1879) to countless others she is often depicted semi-naked, or an isolated hermit repenting for her sins in the wilderness: an outcast. Her primary link with Jesus is as the woman washing and anointing his feet. But we know her best as a prostitute.

The whole story of Mary as a prostitute, who is fallen and redeemed, is a very powerful image of redemption a signal that no matter how low one has fallen, one can be redeemed.

Powerful as this image may be, it is not the story of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in each of the four gospels in the New Testament, but not once does it

mention that she was a prostitute or a sinner. At some point Mary Magdalene became confused with two other women in the Bible: Mary, the sister of Martha, and the unnamed sinner from Luke's gospel (7:36-50) both of whom wash Jesus' feet with their hair. In the 6th Century, Pope Gregory the Great made this assumption official by declaring in a sermon that these three characters were actually the same person: Mary Magdalene, repentant saint. The Catholic Church did later declare that Mary Magdalene was not the penitent sinner, but this was not until 1969. After so long the reputation still lingers.

So who was Mary really? The question is an important one, but perhaps more difficult to attain than one may imagine. The gospels give us one picture - as one of Jesus' closest

disciples, someone who perhaps supported Jesus' ministry financially and was very dear to him. However, outside of this we know little. Her name, Mary Magdalene, perhaps gives us a clue about her background. It suggests that she came from a town called Magdala. There is a place today called Magdala, 120 miles north of Jerusalem on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Moreover, the interesting thing about her name is that it suggests something else altogether: she was unmarried. A married woman would have carried her husband's name and Mary did not, and this was unusual for women of her time.

There have also been all sorts of controversies around this. Though Dan Brown was not the originator of the idea, his book the Da Vinci Code played on the theme that Jesus and

Mary were more than just companions. The evidence for this is scarce and is a certain reading of one paragraph from the Apocryphal writings the 'Gospel of Philip'. Speculations aside, the reading from Mark's gospel tonight gives us one frame on the documentary of Mary's life with Jesus, and this is what is important.

She is described as someone who supported Jesus and the twelve with money, food, and loving care. She was a disciple; some have even called her an apostle. She is someone's whom devotion is an example of the Christian life and it is on this description that Mary has found a special place in the heart of the church. There are three reasons why I feel this personally. One, this description reminds me of the love and care I received as a child from

my own mother, a sacrificial love, both financially and emotionally. We all know the importance of a strong woman's love in our lives, and Mary epitomises this for me. Secondly, she elevates the feminine-like love of God that is so often missing in protestant worship and theology.

The reasons for this vary, and though other traditions may have maintained it they still have not accepted women as equal in ministry. However, in our own tradition with the loss of Marian devotion in Britain, came a loss of balance in feminine and masculine symbols and rituals of worship, which I feel has been detrimental to the Anglican Church at certain times. Recognition and devotion to such women as Mary help to restore this balance. Because it gives us a wider vocabulary to use of God and they are examples of

strong women, whose faith and devotion challenge our own. Thirdly, a more selfish reason is that whilst living in Oxford Mary Magdalenian's Church in the centre of the city was my favourite place of worship, and will always hold a special place in my heart.

So as we gather today to thank God for the life and witness of Mary Magdalene, may we be nourished by her love for our savour so that in turn we may offer the same love and care to those we meet upon that road we call the journey of faith.

Amen