

apostle to the apostles

a sermon preached on the

feast of mary magdalene

22 July 2018

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Song of Songs 3:1-4a; Psalm 63; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-21; John 20:1-18

Today we celebrate the feast of Mary of Magdala. Today's gospel gives us a modern interpretation of that holy woman's role in the living, dying and rising of Christ. We see Mary portrayed not only as one who waited at the cross during Jesus' passion, but the one to whom his rising was first revealed and as one with a profound love of him. Her importance is apparent in her capacity to call Peter to action over her vision of the risen Christ. Mary is presented as being on more or less equal terms with Peter, and so as one of the leaders of the disciples.

But history has not always been so kind to Mary. This elevated and important status was not given her by the synoptic gospel writers. And through the middle ages her identity was conflated with Mary of Bethany and the Mary who anoints Jesus' feet a few days before he is betrayed. This leads to a body of art and iconography that portrays Mary as either a prostitute or as a penitent. It also led people to interpret any representation of her in red as symbolic of her fallenness, although this is a misinterpretation of art-history, Mary Mother of our Lord was also dressed in red in some iconography.

So, Pope Gregory I, in a homily on Mary in the late sixth century, says of her: 'Mary Magdalene had been a 'sinner in the city'. She loved Jesus, the Truth, and washed away the stain of her wickedness with her tears.' These misinterpretations overlook completely the role given to her in John, which we read today. The shifts through history offer a lesson on the certainty of scripture, in which some relatively recent archaeology plays a part.

What happened between the Gospel of John which places Mary in a senior role and honours her close relationship with Jesus, and the negative picture of her presented by Pope Gregory? I think we can see a culture war underway at the time of the formation of the canon of biblical text, A dispute that sought to establish an orthodox vision of the community of disciples, a certainty over ethical principles by which to order community life, and assumes society is male dominated and women are relegated to silence and subservience. Sound familiar?

From archaeology, we know that around the fourth century in the common era, a large trove of so-called heretical texts was hidden in a clay jar near the monastery of St. Pachomius in Upper Egypt. It was discovered in 1945, now known to us as the Nag Hammadi gnostic gospels. Some scholars believe they belonged to the monastery and were hidden to protect them from St Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who had condemned the use of non-canonical texts.

In 1886 another text, written in the fourth century CE, was found, also in Upper Egypt. This codex contained, among others, fragments of a book called the Gospel of Mary, thought by leading scholars to be about Mary Magdalene. Possibly it was hidden for the same reasons because this Gospel of Mary contains a completely different picture of the person than the medieval leadership church leaders would have us see.

In the remaining fragments of this Gospel, Mary is portrayed as a leader of the community of the disciples, alongside Peter. It suggests that the church was not unified as the Book of Acts would have us believe but divided in factions over the interpretation of the last days of Jesus and the responsibility of the disciples to carry on his mission. It challenges the scriptural interpretation of the

church being gathered around a certain and fixed set of social ethics. It challenges our view of Jesus as a radically single man (read celibate) and indicates Mary was his close friend, maybe his lover.

You may be challenged by this possibility. But that is my point—maintaining a fixed interpretation of the social history of 2,000 years ago carries risks. It accepts the political and ethical agendas of authors of an earlier time as certain and appropriate for the context of the modern day. It assumes a relatively fixed reading with limits on interpretation that ignore context and the development and the progress of knowledge as we discover more about the world around us.

Moreover, a fixed reading leaves us potentially with a community divided between fundamentalist and progressive interpretations as positions from which to argue. There are plenty of examples. Do we still read the creation stories as historical fact now that we have archaeological and genetic evidence of human development? Well, some may, but they are a declining minority. Do we still regard male social leadership, as normal? Perhaps in Sydney.

Contemporarily we are challenged when reading scripture within a community that has socially normalised homosexuality and same sex marriage. The political difficulty in society generally, and the church more acutely, is how we hold a diverse range of views.

What is happening in regard to same sex marriage both politically and ecclesiastically is to set orthodox bases from which argument is launched and which become defensive positions from which people are unwilling to stray. The battle lines are drawn and the culture wars begin. I have little doubt that within secular community politics these arguments will settle. I am not so confident that they will in the church.

What we are missing is the capacity to have a reasoned and respectful conversation between church factions of diverse political and ethical viewpoint that seeks to reveal the truth while remaining a community united.

This is the outcome when one group sees its viewpoint as ‘correct,’ orthodox and unchangeable, and is unwilling to remain in community with those holding an alternative viewpoint, to agree to differ, because of the risk to the converted. If there is no resolution schism is the outcome, and for the church, the culture wars would become the money and property wars. A community so far distant from the expectations of the gospel can hardly be imagined.

The rehabilitation of Mary of Magdala by the church, apparent in today’s gospel and which continues in the reading of ‘her gospel’ is an example of a reflective church that has the capacity to be sufficiently self-confident to be able to admit an alternative worldview and be prepared to change or at least to listen respectfully. That’s the kind of church I would like to see.