

thirsting for God
a sermon preached on the
feast of mary magdalene
21 July 2019
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by dr muriel porter

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

Of all the saints the Church honours, there are few as richly rewarding for our contemplation as Mary Magdalene. She has fascinated not just the Church, but artists, poets, and novelists for the past 2,000 years. Until recent times, she was tragically traduced as a fallen woman, a prostitute – the most shameful of sinners for prurient puritans. In this version, she was portrayed as a deeply penitent sinner, a woman grieving and forsaking her terrible past. Novelists have also focused on her sexual identity, portraying her often either as Jesus' lover or his wife. What all these versions of Mary conveniently ignored was that she was in fact a leading disciple of Jesus, and probably a key leader in the early Church, an equal to St Peter himself no less. We can thank recent biblical scholarship for redeeming her, and restoring her to us as a very important person in our Lord's ministry.

What do we know about her? Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus healed her of seven demons¹, probably a first-century understanding of a severe mental illness. She is mentioned along with a group of women from Galilee, most of whom Jesus had healed, who travelled with Jesus and the male disciples, financing their ministry out of their own resources. She is almost always named first in the lists of women, and is mentioned a dozen times in the New Testament, across all four gospels.²

Scholars are currently exploring what her name Magdalene meant. The traditional view has been that it meant she came from a town called Magdala, in Galilee, and if that is the origin of her name, then it would mean she was almost certainly a single woman and probably a businesswoman. It was quite rare for women to be identified by their location in this way, and would show that she had standing in her own right, a rarity in the patriarchal world of the first century. Given she was one of the women financially supporting the wandering band of disciples, she must have had independent means.

Now scholars are suggesting that 'Magdalene' was more likely a nickname Jesus gave her. He was fond of using nicknames – remember he renamed Simon as 'Peter', meaning 'rock'; he called Thomas 'the twin'; and James and John he called the 'Sons of Thunder', because they were so impetuous and angry. In any case a distinguishing nick-name would have been – and continues to be – useful in identifying Mary Magdalene. Mary, or Miriam, was a very common name at the time, the most common female name in Judaea and Galilee. And Jesus had other female followers and relatives called Mary, so a nickname was almost a necessity. 'Magdala' is the name of a town, but the word means "tower", "watch-tower", or "fortress", in Aramaic. If "Magdalene" is a nickname meaning "tower", then Mary may have been a particularly tall or strong woman. As she was with Jesus in many critical moments of his life and ministry, her nickname may reflect that she was *his* tower, a strong support for him and his followers.

Her significance among the disciples is clear from the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection: all four Gospels name her as among the first witnesses to the raising of Jesus. Matthew, Mark and John also name her as a witness to the crucifixion, and she is the only one of Jesus' followers identified as a witness to his crucifixion, his burial, and his resurrection. All of this – and particularly John's Gospel, today's Gospel, where she meets the Risen Lord in the Easter garden – indicates that she was recognised as an important leader, if not the most important leader, in the early Church. And

¹ Luke 8:1-3

² For example, Luke 8:2; Matt. 27:55-56 cf Mark 16:1

in today's Gospel, she is commissioned by Jesus to tell the male disciples – who had run away from the empty tomb – he had been raised from the dead. She was the 'apostle to the apostles', as the early church designated her.

But – she was a woman. And if women leaders in any walk of life usually have a hard time of it still today, it was unbelievably difficult in the first centuries of the Common Era, when women had no public role. As the Church struggled to become respectable, it did not do to have a woman recognised in such a powerful role. So it did not take very long for her to be discredited. And then as now, if you want to discredit a woman, the surest way to do so is to cast doubt on her sexual morality.

By the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great had effectively declared she had been a prostitute, when he identified her as the unnamed woman, a "woman of the city who was a sinner", who anointed Jesus' feet at dinner in a Pharisee's house.³ The 'seven demons' of which she was healed by Jesus were then claimed to be sexual sins. That identification as a reformed prostitute quickly saw her demoted from church leader to sexual curiosity, tempting artists to portray her as a sultry half-naked temptress. This image continued unabated until very recent times, when biblical scholarship finally restored her to her rightful place.

Mary Magdalene's story is fascinating, but what does it offer us today? There is much to ponder, and particularly the Gospel story of her meeting the risen Jesus in the garden, and receiving from him the commission to preach the resurrection. But there is also another depth of richness to this feast day if we look at the other readings we have heard.

The first reading we heard is from the Song of Songs, and we don't often hear that extraordinarily erotic ancient love poem read in church! Some claim that this book should never have been included in the Old Testament. Others, to justify its inclusion, see it as an "elaborate spiritual allegory", speaking of the mystical union of Christ the bridegroom with a bride who is sometimes seen as the church, sometimes as the mother of Jesus, and sometimes as the individual human soul.⁴ But quite early in Christian history – in the third century – the woman or bride in the poem came to be seen as Mary Magdalene seeking the bridegroom – Christ – in the garden so she could anoint him.⁵ That is why it is always the first reading for this feast day.

What comes across so powerfully in this reading is the theme of yearning, of seeking, of longing, coupled with the anguish of not finding, and then the sheer joy of finding:

“Upon my bed at night
I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
I sought him, but found him not.”

And then

“I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go.”⁶

How that echoes Mary's experience as she goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, and finds him gone! She weeps inconsolably. Though the male disciples she has summoned leave the desolate scene, she cannot tear herself away. She stays there, crying her eyes out. Her sense of loss is palpable. And then, lo and behold, Jesus is there, with her, though at first she thinks he is the gardener – until he speaks her name. “I found him whom my soul loves. I held him” – and she would have kept on holding him, except he tells her she must go and announce resurrection.

The theme re-echoes in the psalm for today. There too, in Psalm 63, we hear the same longing and seeking, the same thirsting for God, the same desire to cling once God is found. And the same finding: “my soul is satisfied as with a rich feast”.⁷

It is not just Mary Magdalene who longed for Christ, whose heart was filled with yearning, who thirsted for God. This is our story too. Even if our longing is not at this moment front and centre

³ Luke 7:37-38

⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*, (Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 2010), 221-222

⁵ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 63

⁶ Song of Songs 3:1-4a

⁷ Psalm 63:5

in our minds, nevertheless our search for God is why we are here today. At some point in our lives, we sensed that here was a place where we could seek and find the risen Lord.

Our longing is in fact a longing that all people share, even though they might not recognise it. As St Augustine of Hippo put it, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”.

We might not always be conscious of finding Christ here, or in our lives day by day. But rest assured that our longing, our seeking, is not in vain, as Mary Magdalene discovered even as she wept bitterly by the empty tomb. The risen Christ found her there, at the depths of her longing, and called her by her name. So keep seeking, keep longing, keep thirsting for God – and may we know Christ very near us, calling us by name.