

# *I sought him whom my soul loves*

a sermon preached on the feast of

*Mary Magdalene*

20 July 2014

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The Lections: Song of Songs 3:1-41, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, John 20:1-18

We cannot help but come to this feast day feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines 777 – and with very heavy hearts for the 298 lives brutally cut short. This event is so shocking, in so many ways – begging so many questions.

And, if our hearts can take a bigger dose of breaking, this dreadful event only attunes our view to a vast global body count – in conflicts, oppression, starvation, brutality, injustice, ecological catastrophe, on every continent. And we might wonder, just how much suffering can we take. And perhaps it's not surprising that we are tempted to distract ourselves with trivia and superficiality – as a kind of anaesthetic against too much reality.

While the famous band of men disciples is hiding behind locked doors – Mary Magdalene is making her way in the dark to the tomb.<sup>1</sup> When, having been dragged out of their hiding by Mary, the men see an empty tomb they simply return home<sup>2</sup> – a kind of anaesthetic against too much reality. But Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb, weeping.<sup>3</sup> We can hardly fail to notice how great is the difference – the men running away from suffering, Mary Magdalene remaining with suffering. Why?

One clue is Mary Magdalene's spiritual lineage in Wisdom tradition. We catch a hint of this in the recognition that the Song of Songs is very much her song: "Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves".<sup>4</sup> Weeping. Firmly staring loss in the eye. The breaking of the heart.

Transformation of the heart is the key to the Christian revelation. "A cold heart cannot catch fire".<sup>5</sup> In this spiritual breakthrough Mary Magdalene is arguably the most important figure in Christian history. Mary Magdalene is rightly called 'apostle to the apostles' – the biblical witness attests to the fact of Mary Magdalene's presence at the cross and her status as first witness to the risen Christ. Yet lurking there in the biblical witness are the clues of something far more profound: a deep relationship, a thorough intimacy, between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. "I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is possible to detect in Mary Magdalene signs of the same spiritual breakthrough as her Beloved – the Christ who expresses his yearning that we should enter again into the chamber of the one who conceived us in order to be born into the greater reality.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the Christian tradition moved very swiftly to ensure the marginalisation of Mary Magdalene – along with the Wisdom tradition of which she was a primary voice. In spite of the gospels' universal attestation to Mary Magdalene's status as first witness to the resurrection,<sup>8</sup> the universal attesting to her presence as witness to Jesus' crucifixion,<sup>9</sup> and the majority attestation to her presence as witness to the burial of Jesus,<sup>10</sup> by the end of the sixth century the caricaturing of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons was complete. The equation by which this was accomplished at the hands of celibate male priests is now well-documented.<sup>11</sup>

Equally well documented, now, is the fact that there is *no biblical support* for the assertion that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Yet Christian hymns and liturgies and folklore persistently reinforce this deceitful caricature. Though only Luke names Mary Magdalene as the woman from whom seven demons were cast out<sup>12</sup> – surely a minority report – the church fathers attributed more weight to this minority report

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:1

<sup>2</sup> John 20:10

<sup>3</sup> John 20:11

<sup>4</sup> Song of Songs 3:1

<sup>5</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, sermon 79, cited in Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*, Boston: Shambhala Books, 2010, p201.

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 3:4

<sup>7</sup> John 3:3-6

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-11; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-18

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40; Luke 23:49; John 19:25

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55-56

<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, pp21-23

<sup>12</sup> Luke 8:2

than to the majority report clearly indicating Mary Magdalene's spiritual pre-eminence as witness to the Wisdom tradition. Of what were they afraid, we might wonder?

Only in recent times has Mary Magdalene begun to make her way back. She was given no feast day in England's Book of Common Prayer. She does now have a place in our prayer book. But the first choice of Collect in the APBA echoes Collects in other recent Anglican Prayer Books – focussing on sinfulness and healing.<sup>13</sup> Why this fixation, based entirely on the 'minority report' in scripture? Why the liturgical and ecclesial silence on Mary Magdalene's principal spiritual accomplishment – as one who remained faithful to the dying Christ, who ventured out in the darkness while the men locked their doors, who remains at the place of heartbreak, weeping, allowing her own broken heart to be at one with the broken heart of Christ, embodying holy Wisdom, becoming one in her Beloved?

The most convincing explanation lies precisely in that question. Mary Magdalene's spiritual accomplishment is a living communion – a one-ness with her Beloved for whom she has searched in the night, "a new creation"... embodying the "ministry of reconciliation"... with Christ "reconciling the world".<sup>14</sup> Mary Magdalene's communion in Christ is mediated through the breaking of her heart which is always catching fire. Knowledge of God in Christ is a function of the heart, not the head – of grace not law.

Most crucially, Mary Magdalene's communion with Christ is attained through the heart's capacity for self-emptying – *kenosis*. This kenotic way of the heart transcends all tribal boundaries and grasping at power. And here is the critical factor – the early church fathers preferred tribalistic legalism over Christ's pan-tribal flaming heart of reconciling love. As the early church convinced itself of the need to draw tight boundaries around itself – declaring anyone outside the creedally and canonically codified definitions as 'heretics' – so patriarchal power and an increasingly rationalistic theological edifice constructed by celibate males gained ascendancy, drawing rigid lines on the Christian map. Christ's kenosis and non-duality gave way to Christendom's grasping at power and orthodoxy's undoing of Christ's reconciliation. Power-fixated dualism thus took hold of Christianity in a vice-like death grip. Mary Magdalene's spiritual breakthrough and the non-duality of Wisdom tradition threatened patriarchal power and dualism – thus was she caricatured, Wisdom tradition forced underground. Christianity and the whole world has suffered greatly ever since.

But we are truly blessed to be living in a time of a tremendous rediscovery. Mary Magdalene's voice is beginning to be heard again. She is making her reappearance in many and varied ways. She is midwife to Christianity's long-suppressed Wisdom tradition's rebirthing. At precisely this era when we find ourselves overwhelmed by the enormity of suffering and calamity in a globalised world – where the shooting down of airliners is made known to most people on the planet almost instantaneously, and in which the inter-connections between all of us on mother earth are expanding exponentially – in this very era Mary Magdalene and the non-dual Wisdom tradition are making their re-entry onto the spiritual stage.

Though Teilhard de Chardin prophetically declared in 1931 that "the age of nations is past"<sup>15</sup> – and though nationalistic tribalism is indeed a force which is incapable of giving birth to a future – not surprisingly tribalism is fiercely defended, its passing an evolutionary process, rather than a light switch moment. It is sobering to glance around and observe that tribalism remains an exceedingly potent force everywhere – alive and active in this nation. And this time it's not Islamic 'terrorists' stuck in a tribal worldview – but supposedly 'Christian' terrorists stuck in a tribal worldview! Moreover, collectively, Christianity as a whole remains captive to a patriarchal, tribalistic, dualistic mindset – as any conversation about 'mission' reveals that the very concept is still mired in dualism and tribalistic rivalry.

But the world is gradually waking up – albeit by an evolutionary way – to the fact that tribalism offers no future to humankind or the planet. This evolutionary waking up is painful and difficult. Mary Magdalene's reappearance within Christian tradition is all the more to be celebrated – as we welcome the evolutionary supersession of patriarchal theology's dualism and tribalistic rivalry, by the Magdalenic burning heart of non-dual reconciling love.

For as 'apostle to the apostles' Mary Magdalene's kenotic transformation of energies in the heart is the key – to a non-dualistic, post-tribalistic future, for humankind and planet alike. We are to become, with Mary Magdalene, one in the heart of Christ – in Christ, reconciling the world.

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<sup>13</sup> *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p615; *The Book of Common Prayer*, New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979, p242; *A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia o Mihinare Aotearoa*, Auckland: William Collins, 1989, p657; *The Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*, Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985, p415; *Common Worship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p436.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17,18,19

<sup>15</sup> Teilhard de Chardin P, "The Spirit of the Earth", in *Human Energy*, London: William Collins, 1969, p37