

# *the work of the soul*

a sermon preached on the feast of

*mary magdalene: apostle to the apostles*

24 July 2016

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by fr david moore, vicar*

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

“Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves... 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>1</sup>

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you.<sup>2</sup>

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation... in Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself.”<sup>3</sup>

“Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb... [then, after recognising Jesus, she] went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’.”<sup>4</sup>

In all the Scriptures set for today’s feast we see how our tradition has preserved one of its fundamental insights: how God in Christ has fashioned our hearts for desire, to long for union with the Divine Love, and thus, ultimately, with all things, and that this union is both possible and real.

The ‘organ’ in which this union with Divine Love is accomplished is the soul. It is the soul who loves, and yearns, and searches. It is the soul who accomplishes the reconciling of all things. It is the soul who withstands all suffering and agony, until the breakthrough of recognition.<sup>5</sup>

And this wonderful feast – only recently restored to the mainstream church calendar – reminds us that the quintessential – we could I think almost say ‘archetypal’ – model for us in this spiritual task is none other than the very same woman who our tradition unjustifiably maligned for so many centuries.

That truth and insight comes from the woman so maligned by Christian tradition is not a surprise, of course – since the very core of our tradition – the Paschal Mystery – witnesses to fact that salvation only comes from the despised, forgiving victim.

So Mary Magdalene embodies tangibly that primary energy intuited in the much-neglected Wisdom tradition: the yearning of the soul for union, for one-ness, by which God is reconciling the world. And it seems most likely that her appalling treatment almost from the beginning of the Christian era is precisely because she ‘gets it’, while the male disciples clearly do not. John’s resurrection account captures this so succinctly: while Mary Magdalene remains at the place of suffering and death, the ‘heroic’ males turn away, uncomprehending, regressing – ‘returning home’ in this case indicates regression.

In early Christian texts – subsequently deemed to be ‘heterodox’ according to the ascendant patriarchy – it is made even more explicit that Jesus regards Mary Magdalene as the pre-eminent disciple: because she has undergone the work of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

Why is it so difficult for the men – and now, regardless of gender, the entire Western consciousness – to undergo the work of the soul? I think it has a great deal to do with the dualism which has so permeated the Western mind. By ‘dualism’ I mean the sundering of our essential one-ness, the destructive division between matter and spirit, consciousness and the material body, earth and heaven, and so on. From Plato to

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

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 63:1

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16,17,19

<sup>4</sup> John 20:11,18

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 63:5-6

<sup>6</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Boston: Shambhala, 2008, p82.

Descartes, through the three Abrahamic faiths, to contemporary materialistic science and economics, dualism – the assertion of an irreconcilable split – has plagued us in every aspect of life. One philosopher has even described this universal deep-rooted dualism as ‘a kind of original sin’.<sup>7</sup>

I am struck that so often in conversation about matters of faith there is an almost total reliance on the propositions people ‘believe in’. There is an almost complete reliance on ‘thinking’ things. The whole Western consciousness has become Cartesian: we think therefore we are!

And this one-sided intellect is always plotting and scheming and strategizing and seeking to take control of things. The men at the tomb cannot figure it out in their heads, they can’t strategise, they can’t control the Easter reality – so they regress to an apparent certainty, uncomprehending.

The Christian community looks for scapegoats for its many difficulties. But I think the real illness is our shocking addiction to strategy, scheming, plotting.

My sense is that this is a significant factor in the paralysis we experience here. We are so accustomed to behaving as though the Body of Christ is an institution, we are trapped in the strategizing and mind games which thwart the flourishing of our true potential, our capacity to seek the One whom our soul loves.

Now I regularly have to point out that as scientist by initial training I am hardly advocating the neglect of mind – or of its creative product, intentional action. But what the clever well-educated Western mind has frequently blinded itself to is its appalling poverty – because in its effort for dominance it has despised, neglected, and even forbidden its opposite. Its opposite perplexes, frustrates intellect – for the very reason that its language, logic and priorities are entirely different, and indeed often countermands intellect.

The crucial neglected factor is the soul – what in the Greek in the New Testament is called *psychē*, which we recognise in English as ‘psyche’, and which is often translated as ‘life’! The hard line Western mind continues to deny the existence of the psyche; on the grounds that it says it cannot be ‘scientifically’ measured. There are even schools of ‘psychology’ that deny the existence of the psyche! The despising of the psyche may indeed be original sin! And quite possibly at the root of many of our modern Western ailments, which we attempt to solve with a materialist-medical model of health – but which the medical model is at a loss to explain.

Mary Magdalene is ‘apostle to the apostles’ because she knows there is nothing to figure out. She is not in the grip of the dualism that reduces reality to intellect, mind, rationality. Mary experiences the risen Lord because her mind has not taken her soul captive. Mary is seeking the one her soul loves. Because she trusts the mystery of the soul, she remains present to the suffering of both cross and empty tomb. Weeping. Weeping is not a product of mind, but a work of the soul. And the work of her soul – through its weeping – is the crucible of reconciliation; the vessel in which the new creation in Christ is reborn.

Mary Magdalene has indeed seen the Lord! And this is so much more than mere visual or mental perception. The ‘reward’ for Mary’s soul longing is a tangible knowledge, bodily experience. This experience of the longing soul reconciles all the opposites, heals all dualism, accomplishes the union with God for which we were made.

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)

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<sup>7</sup> Stan V McDaniel, ‘Jung, Teilhard, and the Psychological Problem of Dualism’, in Fred R Gustafson (ed), *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Carl Gustav Jung Side by Side*, Cheyenne: Fisher King Books, 2015, p52.