

St John the Evangelist, Burgess Hill (22.7.18)  
St Mary Magdalene

## MARY OF MAGDALA

I will seek whom my soul loves ... I found him, 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. (*Song 3.3,4*)

These words from the Song of Songs, an erotic love poem that made its way into Holy Scripture, are part of the OT reading set for today, the Feast of St Mary Magdalene. In choosing them, the compilers of the lectionary have lent credence to the idea that the relationship between Jesus and Mary was an intimate one based on sexual desire. It's an idea that resonates with the tradition that she was a prostitute whom Jesus saved, and has inspired (if that is the word) later speculation that Jesus survived the Cross and married Mary and had children by her.

That later speculation is, of course, nonsense; nor is there any real substance to the tradition that she was a prostitute. You may have seen a programme on Mary by Melvyn Bragg in 2013, in which, with the help of serious scholars he explored who Mary was, and concluded that this tradition was, as we might say today, fake news. Bragg presented a picture of an altogether stronger, more resourceful character. There is nothing in the Bible that supports the traditional picture.

What we do know is that Mary, like Jesus, came from Galilee; that at some time in her life she was healed by Jesus – St Luke tells us that Jesus had driven seven devils out of her; and that she became one of his close companions, one of the women, again according to St Luke,

who provided for Jesus out of their own resources. In other words, she, quite literally, was one of those who enabled Jesus to fulfil his mission. We also know that she was one of three or four women (the accounts differ as to how many) who were the first witnesses of the resurrection. (St John's account differs; he says she was the only one.)

Mary was one of the few who kept faith with Jesus right to the end of his life. She, and the other women, were prepared to go where Peter and the male disciples feared to venture. Mary and her friends had followed those who took Jesus down from the cross and carried him from Calvary to the tomb. They needed to know where he was laid, because, after the Sabbath, which must have a dreadful day of waiting, like a dead weight upon the soul, they were going to the tomb to anoint his body. So, as soon as the Sabbath was over, in the half-light before dawn, they returned.

Why were Mary and the others prepared to risk the wrath of the Jewish authorities? Simply because they loved him, and their love moved them to offer this final act of tenderness. Why did Mary love him? I would guess that it had to do with her healing and the hope that Jesus represented. In today's psalm we heard the cry of the psalmist for God: 'My soul is thirsting for God, the God of my life; when can I enter and see the face of God? (*Psalm 42.1*) Mary also thirsted for God, and saw in Jesus the One who could satisfy her thirst. Jesus was the door through which she could enter upon a new life.

Closeness and intimacy are not inevitably to be equated with sexual desire; there are other, deeper reasons why we are attracted to another. Jesus seems to have opened a door for Mary, more than likely through her healing. Of what she was healed we do not know, though the

reference to casting out devils suggests some kind of mental or spiritual illness. There are other examples of Jesus casting out devils, or evil spirits, like the boy who had convulsions, and Legion who lived among the tombs in Gadara. People who are troubled in this way have a kind of divided personality; their affliction distorts their true selves and makes them behave in ways that are strange, troubling and violent. To be cured of this affliction is to be made whole, to be restored to one's true self, and that seems to me to be quite enough to explain Mary's devotion to Jesus. As St Paul put it, 'When anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Cor 5.17) That was Mary's experience.

Wholeness and generosity characterise Mary's life, and they speak to us today. We may not suffer from mental illness, but I would guess that most of us have experienced a divided life. The competing claims of work and family, the pressure for moral compromise, particularly if we are involved in business or politics, mean that for many life is lived in separate compartments. The Biblical view is that life is one: what we say and do in the market place should be as much a part of our worship as what we say and do in the holy place. Conduct in business and politics should be inspired by the same values and attitudes as govern our private lives. This was how Jesus lived, and Mary will have modelled her life on his. We may not today think in terms of evil spirits as explanations for illness, but the demons have not gone away. Individually they tempt us to cut corners; institutionally they promote corporate and political cultures that work against the common good.

The society in which Mary Magdalene lived was inspired by the idea of *shalom*, that is, a society where everybody's interests are taken

seriously – not just those of the movers and the shakers, but also those of the moved and the shaken. Such a society is built on generosity, not so much financial generosity, though that is important in a world sharply divided between rich and poor, but more particularly on a generosity of spirit. Generosity of spirit is seen in the way we treat those who are different. One way is to build walls to keep people out; Christ's way is to build bridges. He gave himself for all, and, as St Paul insisted, in Christ there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women (*Galatians* 3.28). In Christ the three basic social barriers – race, status and gender – are overcome.

On the Sabbath, as she waited for the dawn, Mary must have felt that her hopes had been cruelly dashed. Like Jesus on the Cross, she must have felt more the absence than the presence of God. I think this is how many of us feel in a world that seems to have little concern for wholeness, where people are increasingly turned in on themselves and demonise those who are different; where demands for equality are fiercely resisted, and generosity is trounced by self-interest. On that first Easter morning, Mary's despair was changed into joy. She was the first to witness the resurrection, God's sign to the world not just that Jesus was alive, but more deeply that the way of the world is not God's way, and that his love, which had changed Mary's life and made her whole, was the only way to overcome the world's divisions.

The risen Jesus gave Mary a commission to go and tell others what she had seen and heard. God calls us to be like her: to seek wholeness, to be generous in spirit, and to tell others what God has done in Christ.

To him be the glory now and for ever. Amen.