

MARY MAGDALENE

Luke 8:1-3

Well today is the feast of St Mary Magdalene. As we heard from our reading from Luke's gospel, Mary Magdalene was one of the followers of Jesus who helped to support his ministry. For a woman to be a follower of Jesus was absolutely revolutionary in Jesus's time. The reading implies that the women were spending a number of nights in strange places, which was just completely outside the social norms of those times. Indeed, even today in the Middle East, women travelling with men would be required to spend their nights with relatives. Almost equally astonishing these women were providing for Jesus and his male followers out of their own means. Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household, mentioned in verse 3 of our reading would almost certainly have been a wealthy woman of considerable means. It's surprising that Joanna was allowed to travel around by herself as a follower of Jesus, but perhaps her husband had died by then. It's also astonishing that a man – Luke – freely admits to all this. Jesus was incredibly acceptive of women in a way which went far beyond the norms of the society of first century Palestine in which he lived. He even accepted a woman, Mary of Bethany, as one of his disciples (Luke 10:38-42). We know that Jesus accepted her as a disciple because she sat at his feet listening to his teaching, which was the mark of a disciple. Don't let anyone tell you that our Christian faith is dismissive of women or puts them down.

But who exactly was Mary Magdalene? Well it's a little bit confusing because Mary was an extremely popular name in Jesus's time, around 25% of all women in first century Palestine were called Mary, and the name occurs 51 times in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, in view of the popularity of the name and the large number of mentions, not all these references are to the same Mary. In fact there are seven different Marys referred to in the New Testament:

Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:27)

Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42)

Mary mother of James and John (Mark 15:40-47)

Mary the wife of Clopas ((John 19:25)
Mary mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12)
Mary a Christian in Rome (Romans 16:6)
and of course Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2)

All these women called Mary are different, but Mary Magdalene is often confused with Mary of Bethany, probably because this error was spread abroad by Pope Gregory in AD 591. Pope Gregory confused the sinful woman who anointed Jesus in Luke chapter 7 (Luke 7:36-50) with Mary of Bethany who also anointed Jesus (John 12:1-8), although these are clearly two separate anointings. The anointing in Luke chapter 7 takes place at the house of Simon the Pharisee, whilst the anointing in John chapter 12 takes place at the house of Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. Pope Gregory then confused Mary of Bethany with Mary of Magdala, even though they are from completely different towns. Mary of Bethany lived with her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem, whilst Mary Magdalene came from Magdala, a small fishing town on the sea of Galilee between Capernaum and Tiberius.

This unfortunate confusion between these three different women has led to Mary Magdalene being incorrectly and unfairly branded as a harlot, because the woman who anointed Jesus in Luke chapter 7 was described as a sinful woman. To this very day the name Mary Magdalene is virtually synonymous with the term 'prostitute' in many people's minds. Our reading from Luke (Luke 8:2) tells us that Mary Magdalene had been demon infested and that seven evil spirits had been cast out of her. We don't know what bondage they imposed on her or how they entered her life, and I'm not going to speculate on that this morning, except to say that this demon possession in no way implies that Mary Magdalene had been a wicked or sinful woman. It would seem that after her release from bondage to these spirits Mary Magdalene became a devoted follower of Jesus.

It's clear from our Old Testament reading from 1 Samuel 16 that the idea of evil spirits is completely Biblical. The fact that this reading speaks of an evil spirit from the Lord also makes it clear that

everything, even evil spirits, are under the complete sovereign control of God.

Returning to Mary Magdalene, it's clear that rather than viewing Mary Magdalene as a wicked and sinful woman, we should in fact see her as an important figure in early Christianity. She is mentioned 12 times in the Gospels, more than most of the twelve disciples. As we've already seen she was a committed follower of Jesus and supported his ministry financially, and she was also present at the crucifixion as Mark tells us:

“Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.” (Mark 15:40-41 NIV)

and this is confirmed by Matthew (Matthew 27:56) and John (John 19:25).

Not only was she one of the few followers of Jesus to witness the crucifixion, but she was also present at Jesus's burial as Mark tells us: “So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.” (Mark 15:46-47 NIV) and this is confirmed by Matthew (Matthew 27:61).

More importantly she was a witness to Jesus's resurrection as Mark tells us:

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the

Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'” (Mark 16:1-7 NIV)
and this is confirmed by all the gospel writers.

As we've heard from these scriptural quotations, other women appear alongside Mary Magdalene as witnesses to the events of that first Easter weekend, but Mary Magdalene is often named first in the gospel accounts which indicates that she was probably the most prominent figure amongst these women.

Perhaps most importantly John tells us that Mary Magdalene was the first human being to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection: “but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.” (John 20:11-18 NIV)
and this is also picked up in the longer ending to Mark's gospel (Mark 16:9-11).

As a result of the accounts of Mary Magdalene in various Gnostic texts, especially the so called Gospel of Mary and the so called Gospel of Phillip, many people have come to believe that there was a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. But this is

completely contrary to the character of Jesus as presented by the genuine Biblical material and is nowhere even hinted at in the New Testament. We should completely reject any such ideas, they are absolutely unthinkable. So, what did happen to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection? Well the truth is that we don't know for certain, but the oldest church tradition is that she left her homeland and settled in Ephesus.

So, what can we learn from Mary Magdalene this morning. Firstly, I think we should learn from her evident devotion to Christ. Christ had released her from the powers of darkness, from the evil spirits with which she was infested, into a glorious freedom which is found in Christ alone. That led her to give both her time and money to serve Christ. She knew the terrible bondage from which she had been released and expressed her gratitude. We should also realise that Christ has saved us from a terrible bondage to sin and death and express our gratitude in our devotion to Christ by giving him our time, our worship and our money.

Secondly, I think we should learn that when we are afflicted by grief and pain – as we will be – we need to be honest about it. Mary Magdalene cried at the tomb, she was overwhelmed by the thought that Jesus's body had been stolen. She didn't know where Jesus was, just that she was at the last place where she had left him – the tomb. She remained there even when everyone else had left and was rewarded with the resurrected Lord calling her by name "Mary" and his voice was easily recognised. Often when we're in pain or trouble we feel that we don't know where Jesus is. But if we wait patiently and turn to Christ, we'll find he's there calling us by name and we'll hear and recognise his voice. Then the response is up to you. Mary fell at Jesus's feet in humble adoration, and so should you.

Finally, there is a challenge to all of us here this morning. Jesus commanded Mary Magdalene to go and tell the disciples that He had risen from the dead and that she had met with the risen Lord and she went and did what she was commanded. There's a lesson here that we need to follow. We have met with the risen Christ and He has freed

us from bondage to sin and death. But, have we told anyone? We need to get out into the world and share this wonderful news! There is power in our message when we can say from our personal experience that we've met with the risen Lord, when we can say "I have seen the Lord".

Well, we've been looking at Mary Magdalene who was and is one of the most misunderstood and maligned figures in scripture. So, let's take away with us today the real Mary. Let's learn from her devotion to Christ, her honesty in the face of pain, her searching for Jesus and follow her example of telling others that He is risen from the dead. Amen.