

St Mary Magdalene

Song of Solomon 3. 1-4; 2 Corinthians 5. 14-17; John 20. 1-2, 11 -18

This sermon was preached at Cross and Stable on July 18th 2010.



St Mary Magdalene is an enigma - a mystery, a puzzle, a teaser. She's in a class along with the enigma code breaking machine at Bletchley Park and Elgar's Enigma variations with the enigma of what the hidden theme tune might be. But if Mary Magdalene is a mystery it isn't really because of what the Bible says ; that is clear. She is the one who Jesus had cured of 7 demons (Luke 8. 1-3); she is the one who stays and watches as our Lord dies on the cross (John 19.25; Mark 15.40 -41; Matthew 27. 56.) she is the one who witnesses and reports the resurrection of our Lord (Mark 16; Luke 24.10; Matthew 28.; John 20. 10 - 18). But is she the one who wets Jesus' feet with her tears, pours precious and expensive oil over them and then wipes those same feet with her hair? What a picture! How we would like it to be her! Mary Magdalene - "that was the naughty lady, wasn't it!" Was she a prostitute? That theory has so entered out culture that the word "Magdalene" has come to mean "reformed prostitute." And, my goodness, to crown it all we have the De Vinci Code with its central premise that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus and bore his child. Glory be!

It is, perhaps, understandable that Mary Magdalene has been layered with the life of a "sinful" woman because Luke describes her as one "from whom seven demons had been cast out." Rather a complete number, that number seven - signifying just how complete Mary's need for healing was. Added to that it is immediately before that we have that enigmatic story of the sinful woman, washing the feet of our saviour. Maybe it is Mary Magdalene, who knows? But Luke, who does name Mary Magdalene, does not name her as the sinful woman.

However, it cannot be denied that for many years that was how she was regarded. I think it stems from there being so many Mary's in the New Testament and the confusion it causes. Pope Gregory the Great in 591 said that the woman who Luke calls the "sinful woman" and who John names as "Mary of Bethany" both of whom are recorded as washing the feet with expensive perfume or oil and wiping them with their hair, and the woman from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark and Luke, Mary of Magdala, are all the same person. I don't think they had looked at the geography - Bethany is by Jerusalem and Magdala is likely to be a fishing town on the borders of the Sea of Galilee - miles apart! This image of Mary has tended to downplay the enormous significance of her being the first witness to the resurrection and of being the apostle to the apostles. In 1969 the Catholic Church finally officially separated the three Marys, but we are still left with that teasing feeling that just maybe.....

Does it matter that our minds are attracted to the enigma, to constructing attractive myths around this woman? I think it does. I think it matters because we can get drawn into a fantasy that satisfies our human need to tell a story and if we move towards the romance of Mary being a reformed prostitute and being romantically involved with Jesus, we are, perhaps trying in the wrong way to express the humanity of Jesus. So we weave a new story but what that story does is centre our attention on Jesus' relationship with Mary - Jesus relationship with another human being. The picture we have of Jesus in the Bible is not one bound by human relationships but one with is eternally expressing Jesus relationship with God and trying to bring us to a fresh understanding of our own relationship with God. It is our relationship with God that comes first; from that flows our relationship with one another.

What constructing a story so centred on sexuality hides is the fact that you can have intense love between people and between Jesus and his followers which has nothing to do with Eros or sexual love. What all the readings we have heard today do is celebrate the sensuality of God. Christianity has neglected the body and the senses, looking at sensuality as a thing to be held in check. Physical feelings are things to be afraid of. But the relationship portrayed in the resurrection scene between Jesus and Mary is physical; the way he says her name affects her physically. The excerpt we had from the Song of Songs is a celebration of the bodily responses to love - seeking and searching, being unable to rest until it is found. It is a poem about love and shows how this deepest of emotions cannot be treated in abstraction; love is found in relationship. So the poem describes the relationship between a youth and a maiden. Our love for God cannot be described in abstraction either; to love God and love Jesus is to enter into a loving relationship with our creator and redeemer. It is what happened to me - I fell in love. I can remember being asked why I was so convinced that I was being called by God and I said I felt compelled, just as it says in 1 Corinthians "Christ's love compels us." Love is what propels us, what gives us the audacity to suggest, what gives us the energy ...to do and to be what ever it is that God meant us to be. To be ourselves, not the construct of a story we think makes life interesting.

Answering the call of the enigmatic is a dangerous business - it is a call that encourages the making up of stories and the building of false images. The responses to the actions of Raoul Moat have been to either demonise him or create a hero. I imagine he was in many aspects an ordinary man, with friends and family, who was denied the help, in retrospect, that he needed, But, he made the wrong choices and killed one person, badly wounded another and blinded one more. He is no hero. But, because the full story was not known, a story had to be constructed and the constructed story that shocked so many people made him into someone to be admired and, what is worse, became a place where hatred and violence against the police and women was expressed. Entry into the world of the enigma can so often lead away from truth.

So from what truth can we move forward with Mary of Magdala? The biggest truth of all is that she saw the risen Christ, that she was told to go and tell of this wondrous event and she did - despite being immersed in a

culture that said there was little value in a woman's voice of witness. The truth is that Jesus did value the witness of women; that many followed him and that of those Mary of Magdala is often named first. Through the love of Jesus, which created her anew, compelled her to stay with him, led her to the place of resurrection, allowed her to let him go and to tell others, Mary expressed in her life the richness of loving God. We don't know it all but we know enough to do the same ourselves. We need not live in a dream world of imagined mystery - the reality is a stranger counterpoint to our human expectations. In the first century Palestinian world of men, women could be called to be the first and to start the action. In this twenty first century women of the Church of England could even be I'll leave you to construct the ending to that story!