

Feast of St Mary of Magdala

It's not long since we last heard this Gospel as one of the first stories of Easter, and we now have read it in memory of today's saint, Mary of Magdala, Mary the Magdalene. She is one of the most important figures in the four Gospels, at least if the frequency with which she is mentioned is anything to go by: 12 times, more than most of Jesus's other disciples, and more than any other women other than his family. One of the most important and, thereafter, one of the most misrepresented.

Her importance to the early church is testified to by the frequency that she appears in the early apocryphal Christian writings, which the church declined to make part of the Canon. There's even a Gospel of Mary, though written about her but with no suggestion that it was written by her. They tend to claim that Jesus loved her most especially; there's even a suggestion that she was John's beloved disciple, and she is represented as receiving a great deal of deep and original teaching from Jesus, all of which is almost certainly nonsense.

Much more widespread and persistent was the belief that three women, the unnamed sinful woman in Luke's Gospel who anointed Jesus's feet, Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who also anointed his feet as we read in John's gospel, and Mary of Magdala who we celebrate today, all three were one and the same person, who was guilty of major sexual sins. This fiction even has Papal endorsement! Pope Gregory 1, Gregory the Great, preached to that effect in 590, and it was part of RC teaching until the 20th century. The Catholic collect used to say that her prayers 'moved thee to restore her brother Lazarus' and was only altered in 1969. It's a little presumptuous to say this to a Pope, even a dead one, but, sorry Gregory, you were talking nonsense. And so, for that matter was Dan Brown in his preposterous *Da Vinci Code*. And also *Jesus Christ, superstar* and *I don't know how to love him*. Good song, Andrew and Tim, bad bible knowledge!

Which is a shame because the true story of Mary of Magdala is so marvellous. (By the way I'm avoiding 'Mary Magdalene' since people keep on thinking that was her surname. It's just the town from which she came. Rather like Leonardo da Vinci, where Vinci is the picturesque little village from which he came which has a nice restaurant where the roads divide and where I once had lunch. But back to Mary!)

What the Gospels actually say is that she was among a group of women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments, and who provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their own resources. One of them was 'Mary the Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out.' Do note that there was no suggestion of a connection between demons and sexual sins. That's a much later idea. So, Mary is an example to all those who further the Kingdom of Christ by their support for other people.

Second, she is among the women near or at the foot of the cross, the men by and large having scarpered. Mary's love supported Jesus in his agonising death and is an example and encouragement to all those, ever since, whose love has supported the suffering and dying.

Third she is among the women who go to anoint Jesus in death and are thus the first witnesses to his resurrection. And for Mary it goes further, for she returns to search for his body. Like the woman in this morning's reading from the *Song of Solomon* who goes about the city seeking for the one 'whom my soul loves', as this Morning's Gospel reminds us, Mary also goes seeking, and encounters through her tears her master. Like the woman in the *Song* she wants to hold him and not let him go, but Jesus tells her not to hold onto him—*Noli me tangere*—but to go to his brothers and announce Jesus's resurrection.

And that's why she has earned herself the high title, the Apostle to the Apostles, the first person called to proclaim Jesus's resurrection and thus an example and encouragement for all Christians who seek to do the same.

So, let us throw out all those idiotic stories that have attached themselves to her, Mary the prostitute, Mary the lover of Jesus, Mary the mother of his children who were the ancestors of the Kings of France—yes, there is such a legend—and also look at all that magnificent renaissance art in which she stars, yes even one of my absolute favourites, Donatello's statue of the Penitent Magdalene, with a new eye, recognising the devotion and skill of the artists but also the historical inaccuracy of their work.

Because that will enable us to hear the true story, the wonderful story, of Mary of Magdala, who in Jesus's life cared for him, the one who had healed her; supported him in his agony and death; was the first to encounter him in the garden, and was sent as the Apostle to the Apostles to proclaim his resurrection.

In all of those rôles she serves as an example and encouragement to us, as we too ask for God's healing and seek to follow, like her, our Master and our Lord.