

Trinity 8: 22 July 2018
Mary Magdalene: John 20: 1-2, 11-18

May I speak in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the Feast Day of Mary Magdalene and our readings are therefore the ones for her saints' day, not the ordinary ones for the 8th Sunday after Trinity. Our Gospel reading gives us a glimpse of the important role she played in Jesus's life. God chose her to be the first witness to his resurrection. What greater honour could be given to a human, except that which was given to another Mary, to become Jesus's mother. Both his mother and Mary Magdalene were present at the crucifixion, and the Gospels of Mark and Luke make explicit reference to Mary Magdalene being one of the women who took spices and ointments to the tomb to anoint his body for burial.

Not only is Mary Magdalene the first witness to Christ's resurrection, but according to John's account the risen Christ directs her: 'Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' She therefore becomes known as the Apostle to the Apostles, again the highest honour that could be given to one of Jesus's followers. And yet for many centuries, up until present times, Mary Magdalene has been completely wrongly seen as a reformed prostitute, the woman who poured precious ointment on the feet of Christ and wiped it away with her hair, and various other attributes linked with sexual impropriety. This image of Mary Magdalene lives on in Western Christianity, and in the secular western imagination, including in Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. And the Roman Catholic Church only elevated the memorial day for St Mary

Magdalene to a Feast in the Church's liturgical calendar in 2016, when Pope Francis recognised her importance as the first witness to the resurrection.

Although there is relatively little detail about her in the Gospels, from other sacred texts of the early Christian era it seems that her status as an 'apostle', in the years after Jesus's death and resurrection, rivalled even that of Peter. One of the most important apocryphal Christian texts not included in the Bible, the Gospel of Mary, discovered in 1896, gives more detail. This Gospel bears Mary Magdalene's name and was so-called not because she wrote it, but because it emerged from a community that recognised her authority. And in this gospel, Peter defers to Mary saying: 'Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Saviour that you

remember, the things which you know that we don't because we haven't heard them.'

And Mary responds: 'I will teach you about what is hidden from you.'

But over the centuries after Christ, the attitude to women which he had clearly espoused, gradually changed until towards the end of the 6th century Pope Gregory the Great, one of the most influential popes, preached a series of sermons which explicitly identified Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute.

The Gospel of Mary, now seen clearly as an important text, was only slowly appreciated by scholars. Now at last we are coming to understand the real significance of Mary Magdalene and what she says to us as fellow disciples of Christ.

Mary knew the closeness of God. She was known through and through by Jesus, and the relationship brought her to a direct experience of God, so different from our own dull working out of the Christian message. A relationship can be a spiritual path, because a deep friendship shifts the centre of our lives from ourselves to the other: in this case, from ourselves to Christ. The path to completeness of being lies through human relationships and intimacy not away from them, laying down our lives for another.

Mary Magdalene sees it all through from crucifixion to resurrection. She is at the Cross in despair, and she is at the tomb in amazed jubilation. There she stands with Him, there is love at the foot of the Cross. And over those three days from death to life renewed, the love does not stop. On the third day, at the empty tomb, she begins to understand that love has won, and that love will always overcome death. In the death is to be found the meaning

of His life: self-giving love. In the garden, the pivotal heart-wrenching scene of today's Gospel, Mary Magdalene meets the Risen Christ, she falls at Jesus's feet, and we hear Jesus say to her: "Do not hold on to me ... tell them I'm ascending to my God and your God."

It's what He'd told the disciples all along. There is another kingdom beyond the limits of space and time, where we are welcomed. There we give back what we have received, we do not cling to what is past, and there is no need for sorrow. Why not? Because not only do we live with the divine life, made in the image of God as the Scriptures say, we are also God's beloved, and we are raised up with Christ. We have participated in His joy and suffering, as Mary did, and are worthy of that kingdom. We are not abandoned in that garden. So, in the story of the resurrection, faith replaces physical contact.

Mary Magdalene knew she was God's beloved, and maybe the story of her great love can help us to see something which we were probably told as children, but have never quite believed; that Jesus Christ died on the Cross, not because an angry God needed a sacrifice for our misdeeds, but because Jesus loves us and gave his life so that we may join him in paradise.

Amen.