

The exchange of 'Happy New Year' greetings, with which our gathering began, will have a hollow ring for more people than usual as we start 2022. We will all be aware of someone or some group for whom the next few weeks or months are unlikely to bring much happiness. At St James we put on a 'Blue Christmas' service in Advent for those for whom the Christmas season would open old or recent wounds. For some today, the year ahead will be looming 'Blue' rather than 'New' and our thoughts and prayers go out to Angela Sibley (St James), whose husband, Alan, died overnight. Our challenge in 2022 will be to bring light into and any and all darkness we come across. Our first hymn, 'What Child is This' (NHWS 355), captures the light and dark sides of life for the Holy Family.

On a lighter note, how many of you have found yourselves watching (or being at peace because the children were watching!) cartoons on TV this Christmas? Schedules would be barren without them! Some cartoons are pure fantasy, others just fun. The best are those with a message of Good triumphing over Bad. The carols we sung at Christmas and the stories we read from Luke and Matthew are a bit like cartoons: they colour and embellish a real event in the hope that its important message, of Good coming into the world and displacing the Bad, will be the better remembered. Without those carols and stories, our Christmas celebrations would seem pretty dull.

However, the Gospels of John and Mark, begin to map out the significance of Jesus' life on earth without Mary, without Joseph and without Angels, yet manage to lighten the darkness, as John's prologue-today's gospel (Jn 1 v 1-18) - explains. It is hard to find new words to say about that prologue: it is a complete and near-perfect summary of the purpose of creation, a purpose completely and perfectly summarized in the life of Jesus. Yet new words need to be found because that light still shines without being understood. Darkness is all-too prevalent in our troubled world, even in the church. There is more than a whiff of arrogance in leaders and believers who, obsessed with the past, think God's spotlight has always been fairly and squarely on, with and for them. The true nature and will of the creator is unfolding before our eyes in the form of climate change, if only we would keep them open and respond aptly as children of light.

John sensed that those who claimed a special relationship with the creator- His chosen people- had not 'seen the light' and were destined to live in darkness. He exaggerated of course: there were converts from Judaism to Christianity that were becoming beacons of light- Paul foremost amongst them- but they were few and far between. For John, like Mark, the light began to shine when Jesus transformed his life in responding to John The Baptists's call (*our focus next week*) but do their whole gospels present a complete and perfect picture? They certainly present different pictures. This morning, I want to introduce you to another gospel that was trying to dispel the darkness but either slipped or was pushed under the radar.

For Christmas, I was given two books about the "Gospel of Mary (of Magdala)": one of which I've read almost finished (Karen King, 2003; Polebridge Press). Copies of Mary's gospel had remained lost until an Egyptologist stumbled across fragments of one at a market stall in Cairo in 1896. There are about 10 such documents written by early Christians in the 1st-3rd centuries. Mary's was one of the earliest and contemporary with John's Gospel but among the last to be translated and properly understood.

Whether Mary's gospel said anything about the birth of Jesus we may never know because the first 1/2 of the gospel (6 pages) are missing, despite the ancient papyrus being well-protected by a leather cover and pages once carefully sown together. The original manuscript may have been vandalized by a male who disliked how it began, ripped out the offending pages and left the rest in disorder. Mary's story does not begin until she is found calming distressed and anxious disciples, notably Peter, after Jesus' resurrection. She describes a vision she has had of the risen Lord and, in her debate with the disciples, reveals a profound understanding of the creator's purpose, how Jesus encapsulated it and how followers can become part of it. She describes Jesus as a 'Child of True Humanity': I can't think of a better cause for celebrating the birth of that child, as we have just done.

Mary also talks of The Mind as an intermediate between soul and physical body: that mind can absorb the creator's spirit (as Jesus embodied John's 'word') and is a harbor for the Good, a phrase which Mary uses in place of God. To her, the Mind and the Good are indestructible and eternal. Such ideas were well ahead of their time, only now becoming mainstream amongst progressive Christians, like Richard Rohr and his Community of Action and Contemplation. Mary's ideas, she

(or her disciples) claims, came through her close relationship to the saviour, a closeness acknowledged by the other disciples in the text and hinted at in the canonical gospels, making her a contender for the role of John's 'disciple whom Jesus loved most'. Mary urges the disciples to be subject to no constraints that did not emanate from Jesus, during and after his death, because only He understood the divine purpose, in all its simplicity. Desmond Tutu would- I suspect- love what Mary says: his beloved 'ubuntu' or African spirit of goodwill, described in his 2015 book, 'In God's Hands'- seems close to Mary's 'Mind'. Jesus eyes would roll at the sight of our multi-layered canon law and the need for bishop- led committees to approve any and all changes to our church buildings!

In several respects, Mary's gospel and John's prologue are similar hymn sheets. But in those patriarchal times, men probably intervened to ensure that only John's words were sung. Mary's gospel is only just emerging from the shadows and there are probably many amongst the hierarchy in our churches who would prefer to keep it hidden. Had Mary's gospel not been suppressed, church history may have been very different:

- women would have exercised earlier prominent leadership roles;
- sin would have been downgraded (Jesus is said to have told Mary it was not important) and used less as a means of domination in church liturgies.
- compassion and love would have been pushed forward instead.

In summary, the Light would have arguably have shone more brightly and the Darkness seemed less forbidding.

May this New Year be one in which we open our minds to new possibilities and light pour forth from us as fruits of renewal.

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