

Year A Feast Day of Mary Magdalene

Judith 9: 1 & 11-14

2 Corinthians 5: 14-17

John 20: 1-3, & 11-18

Mary Magdalene – No Less Than Apostle to the Apostles

Yesterday, 22nd July, was the feast day celebrating the life and witness of Mary Magdalene. So, rather than the readings for Proper 16 of Ordinary time I have chosen today to use the readings for Mary Magdalene instead and to use her life story as the basis for our service. In the Scottish Episcopal Church Mary Magdalene is a level 4 day in our Calendar, out of 6 levels for how we are to treat her day¹.

Given the prominence of Mary Magdalene in the gospels, it is surprising that for most of us she only comes into our consciences when we come to Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday, when I am privileged to proclaim the resurrection in the fabulous reading from John chapter 20, part of which we heard today.

There are seven different Marys mentioned in the New Testament, or to be more accurate, Miriams, as that is the Hebrew we know as Mary. Let's see how we do in reciting them all...

- ✝ Mary, mother of Jesus
- ✝ Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha
- ✝ Mary, mother of James the younger and Joseph
- ✝ Mary, mother of Clopas
- ✝ Mary of Jerusalem, the mother of John, whose home was used as a meeting place after Jesus' death, where Peter went to after the angel sprung him from jail (see Acts 12:12)
- ✝ Mary, mentioned by Paul in Romans 6:6
- ✝ And
- ✝ Mary of Magdala, who we know as Mary Magdalene.

¹ Any day denoted between level 1 (directly relating to Christ) to Level 4 are required to be observed by the Church. The levels are used to denote precedence – should two dates conflict in a certain day, the higher level takes precedence and is observed.

Mary is first mentioned in Luke 8:1-3². She is one of three women who had been following Jesus in his Galilean mission alongside the male disciples. And just as important, the women were providing financial support to the Galilean mission out of their own funds. So, this tells us that Mary managed her own possessions and wealth, indicating that she was probably a widow of a wealthy husband, as a woman would not otherwise have control of wealth.

Luke tells us that Mary had been healed by Jesus; Jesus had exorcised seven demons from her. The moment we read or hear the number seven, we need to be alert. For the Jews, seven was a holy and complete number. So, maybe this tells us how completely Mary was suffering from her affliction, possibly poor mental health, and possibly like many women at that time, coping with the loss of children in childbirth or infancy, or possibly grieving after the death of her husband?

We simply don't know. What we do know is that Luke acknowledges and mentions the women in and around Jesus during his ministry and tells us some of their names. They are not anonymous or hidden. They are important and make significant contributions to the life and ministry of Jesus.

Mark and Matthew mention the women only after Jesus' death³. All four gospels state that Mary was present at the Crucifixion, staying when all the disciples had fled, and that she was present at the empty tomb on the day of resurrection. In the synoptic gospels she receives a commission from Christ to tell the male disciples about His resurrection. It is Luke who informs us that the disciples were sceptical and did not believe her because she was a woman. As we read John's account this morning, we heard the risen Christ appeared first to Mary and talked to her about his coming ascension.

Many people will also connect Mary Magdalene with her unfounded reputation for being a prostitute. This comes from a linkage to the story in Luke 7:36-50 of an unnamed sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and poured perfume over them, in Simon the Pharisee's house. It appears we

² **8** After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; ³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

³ Matt 27:55-56, 61. 28:1. Mark 15:40-41, 47. 16:1

have Pope Gregory the first⁴ to ‘thank’ for this. Gregory conflated Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the unnamed sinful women in his Easter sermon in 591. The story of the sinful woman in Mark chapter 7 leads directly into Luke mentioning Mary Magdalene in the beginning of chapter 8. Could this be why Pope Gregory chose to conflate the two women? We really don’t know, and we can’t readily ascribe a motive for making this linkage between the two.

What we do know is that a woman who witnessed Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, who was present at his crucifixion and death, who was the first witness to his resurrection, and who was commissioned by Jesus to tell the apostles of his resurrection, had her reputation denigrated and for centuries people saw her as a prostitute or at least a sinful woman. In fact, her reputation led to her becoming the patron saint of ‘loose women’. Magdalene asylums were created to ‘save’ women from prostitution and we also have the sorry history of Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, where young unmarried mothers were sent and basically imprisoned and used as cheap or unpaid labour.

This is the same Pope Gregory who brought so much to the church; who sent Augustine to Canterbury and Paulinus to York, who united much of Western Europe with Rome, who radically revised and developed Roman worship and encouraged chanting in church, which adopted his name as a result. Even John Calvin called him a great Pope, admittedly saying he was the last great Pope. We will never know if Gregory genuinely or erroneously conflated the sinful woman with Mary, or if there was a conscious or unconscious bias against women that meant he could not admit to the reality of a woman being an apostle – for yes, she witnessed as much as most of the men who followed Jesus, and was there at the Crucifixion and Resurrection, so can rightly be defined as, and called, an apostle. It wasn’t until 2016 that Pope Francis revised Mary’s status in the Roman Catholic church so that her day of remembrance was changed from ‘memorial’ to ‘feast’ and said she would now be referred to as ‘the apostle to the apostles’.

This study of Mary Magdalene leads me to a few conclusions:

- ✚ We are all complex beings, and in Pope Gregory we have someone who did great things to advance Christianity in Europe, whilst through his Easter sermon in 590, denied Mary Magdalene her place as an important and critical character in the life of Jesus. It goes to prove that none of us

⁴ Pope from Sept 590 – March 604

are perfect, and a good reason not to accept that someone can be infallible. We are all human and err. This does not make Gregory a bad man, it just shows that despite being great and shaping Christianity in Europe for many centuries, he had his faults too. He may or may not have been misogynistic, he may or may not have been influenced by the views on the worth of woman, but his actions had an impact on how we view Mary and her place in the Christian story.

- ✝ Mary Magdalene, based on all the gospels, was a major facilitator in Jesus' ministry in Galilee, and was there at the foot of the Cross and at his resurrection. In my opinion she deserves to be named as an apostle, as she meets the definition. I agree with pope Francis that she should be known as 'apostle to the apostles'.

- ✝ Mary Magdalene's reputation was damaged by Pope Gregory and by those who amplified his erroneous linkage to the sinful woman, which means her true role in the life of Jesus had diminished. What does that say about all of us who read the story and see 'sinful woman' and fail to see the story of what she achieved, witnessed and how she supported Jesus? Even if she had been a sinful woman, did not Jesus teach us to forgive, and to love our neighbours as ourselves? Do not other people deserve a chance of forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation, just as we desire that for ourselves? In what circumstances might we see that someone who made some bad choices or had no other choices due to life circumstances, has indeed changed, and we need to view them differently, and see them based on who they are today, not by what they did in the past?

- ✝ In today's world women are still subject to misogyny and attacks on their reputation, to being described in negative ways that men portraying the same behaviours would not be. In striving for God's kingdom here on earth, we must all be alert to this, and seek to ensure God's justice and peace is present.

Today's readings and my reflections on Mary Magdalene have led me to reflect and challenge my own perceptions of people, and to pray that I may have the grace to see people for who they currently are, for 'you will know them by their fruits'⁵, and not focus on who they may have been, or by what other people

⁵ Matthew 7:20

wish to tell me. And, also that there are occasions when we get things wrong, when we say or act in ways we later realise were not right. They do not define us, and we would hate it if others decided to hold that memory, rather than observe other evidence that shows an individual made a simple mistake or maybe has more fundamentally changed, having been reconciled to Christ and is seeking to live a different life.

So, today, I give you Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles. A woman who is a key character in the ministry of Jesus and in the story of his resurrection. Just one of many significant women in the Holy Scripture, for whom we give thanks today.

Nick Bowry