

Sermon for Mary Magdalene Yr B

Readings

[Song of Solomon 3.1-4](#)

[2 Corinthians 5.14-17](#)

[John 20.1-2, 11-18](#)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

Well today is the 8th Sunday after Trinity, a Sunday in what the church is pleased to call 'Ordinary Time', but it's also July 22nd, which is Mary Magdalene – and is she a much more interesting subject to talk about? Well, Perhaps! Let's see

So what do our readings offer us today?

Well to begin with there's the reading from the Song of Solomon/ Song of Songs/ Canticle of Canticles – it has a variety of titles, which imply by their form a superlative, or try to imply a connection to Solomon, which may never have existed – for what little we can say about the dating doesn't seem consistent with a connection with Solomon.

It seems to be an attempt to bring together a diverse collection of songs or poems, not easily dated either individually or as a collection. Its structure, if indeed it has one, is the subject of scholarly debate.

So how do we read this book, accepted as canonical (not without some opposition) both within Judaism and Christianity?

Is it, perhaps, as it has been described 'all Breasts and Thighs and perfume' – is it love poetry? People have been known to get quite excited at the thought, but I leave that connection as something for you to do if you feel inclined.

Do we follow what might be called the 'Official Line' and take it as a metaphor of the relationship between the Believer (or the Church) and the Creator?

The reading we have today is presented as a Dream of Love – or is it a daydream, a waking fantasy? It certainly speaks of a search and a finding and a 'not letting go' , and it's written, at least this part, as if with a a female voice.

The Gospel passage is interesting, for in it Mary goes to the tomb alone, where in the other gospels she goes in company with other women. (please notice it is a split reading – sometimes what gets left out, in this case the account of the Two Male disciples looking inside the tomb and reportedly seeing the empty wrappings, may be as significant as what is included- It's always worth checking the omitted part if this happens!) Would a woman have gone there on her own, except, perhaps, to mourn? Was she upset at the apparent violation of the tomb? Was her rush back to find the male disciples a recognition that, in a patriarchal society, women's witness was routinely undervalued?

Mary has, as far as we know, left us no writings of her own, though she appears in both Canonical and non Canonical sources – was she written out of the story? she is often seen as an assertive woman – and an apostle – at a time when women were usually assumed to be inferior beings (I dare you to try that out at Queens – or indeed here)

Mary has been assumed, by some, to be a prostitute, an idea which seems to have arisen from a medieval confusion of different Mary's and the nameless woman who had sinned in some unspecified way. Anyway David tells me that the Pope has exonerated her from this claim!

I'm not sure it's up to him to do this as a 'mere male' when the evidence for the claim was

so tenuous

Mary Magdalene's name(possibly given because she came from Magdala, modern Migdal, in Galilee, a few miles from Tiberius) has been given to a couple of colleges (one each at Oxford and Cambridge) , several churches, and perhaps we should recall the sad history of Magdalene Laundries, theoretically Christian institutions for the 'care' (some would say, slave labour) of 'fallen women' and 'bad girls' (judge not...)as something which needs to be revisited as a matter of shame.

It seems likely that much of what we hear said about Mary is the product of fevered male imagination – if you go in search of images of her, you will find some which are, to put it politely, very lightly draped, leaving little to the imagination.

So we have some differing views of Mary:

First to witness the resurrection?

A woman apostle, increasingly marginalised by a patriarchal Church?

A lady of 'doubtful character'? (Terry Pratchett might have said 'negotiable affection')

And in some popular literature, Jesus' wife, and mother of their children, children who went on to be the Merovingian Rulers in the early years of the present era.

It has been claimed that for Jesus not to have been married would have been unusual for a Jewish Male of that period, and that avoidance of this aspect of Humanity could be seen as detrimental to the idea that Jesus was in some sense, in the Incarnation, both fully human and fully divine. I leave that with you as a thought, a thought which is in tension with much of the orthodox account of Jesus' life and death,

Some of these views are, to put it mildly, unorthodox – which doesn't mean we shouldn't be willing to think about them.

As so often, I seem to have left you with more questions than 'answers'

In a bit of an aside, I've just finished, after a lapse of years, reading (I'm not sure that's the right word, but it will have to do) Ian McGilchrist's work *The Master and His Emissary* perhaps more of which at another time. I was struck by something he says in the concluding pages of the book,

Certainty is the greatest of all illusions: whatever kind of fundamentalism it may underwrite, that of religion or of science, it is what the ancients meant by *hubris*.

And he quotes a philosopher, GE Lessing (1729-1781 if you want his dates)

If God held enclosed in his right hand all truth, and in his left hand the ever living striving for truth, although with the qualification that I must ever err, and said to me 'choose', I should humbly choose the left hand and say 'Father give! Pure truth is for thee alone

and those words to me encapsulate much of my attitude towards knowledge, and perhaps help to explain my rather cautious approach to any who claim to be in possession of Truth – often written with a Capital T.

So I leave you with uncertainty about this issue, with a conflicting, a varied story, whose only common theme seems to be the binding power of Love, a love which is in one sense realised in Mary's moment of recognition when the risen one calls her by name. Contrast this moment in which she is asked **Do not hold on to me** with the sentence from our first reading **'I held him, and would not let him go'**– is this perhaps a moment when we can realise that true love (different, perhaps, from the desire we call lust) does not grasp, is seen as much in release and in giving freedom to the object of love as it is in possession of the Beloved? I leave you with that as a final question to ponder.