

## **St Mary Magdalene – Sung Eucharist, Sunday 22nd July, 2018**

A few weeks ago, I told you about the church I first went to in this country and where as a young boy I became a member of the choir. The church itself has a largely unknown history although it is thought to have been built in 1255 and dedicated under the patronage of Mary Magdalene. It was never supposed to be a parish church, being built ostensibly as a chapel of ease to the parish church which was situated a short distance away in the ancient town or village of Kenfig, an important port town at the time. Disaster struck Kenfig however, and the town was enveloped and destroyed by encroaching sand dunes until only remains of the castle could be seen. St Mary Magdalene's chapel then became the parish church, the village itself becoming known as 'Mawdlam', a derivative of 'Magdalene'; the village therefore gaining its name from its patron saint.

During my time as a choirboy there, a new stained glass window was installed and dedicated. It was hugely controversial and probably extremely brave for a small and ancient church to include something so modern in the building. I can't remember the name of the artist, but the vicar at the time described it as being a cross between sculpture and stained glass. Very modern in design, the vivid colours of the glass and the rather deep structures holding the glass in place made a distinct impression on me then and have remained with me since.

However, the only trouble with many artistic portrayals, whether on canvas or in stained glass is that they have rather distorted the reality of the lives of the people involved or the incidents they depict. What we often have is a somewhat sanitised and romanticised portrayal. Nowhere is this more true than depictions of Mary Magdalene in art. What then do we know about her?

Like most of the followers of Jesus, not much is known about Mary Magdalene. However, in comparison to many of the other disciples and followers, she is mentioned more than most. There were a number of Mary's mentioned in the gospels as it was a popular name, as it is now. To distinguish her from the other Marys, she was known by the town from which she came, Magdala, which was a village on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Interestingly, although she is not mentioned in St Mark's gospel until the crucifixion, nevertheless she must have been of some importance among the followers of Jesus because, when there is a list of women, Mary Magdalene is usually listed first, some scholars therefore thinking that she might have had a similar importance to Peter among the Jesus' female followers. She may even have been a woman of financial means as she is listed in Luke chapter 8 as being among the people who supported Jesus and his disciples out of their resources.

Luke 8 also tells us that Mary Magdalene had been exorcised by Jesus and that seven demons had been cast out. This of course may be taken at face value, but it is also widely accepted that when this is referred to, it refers to what we might consider to be physical or mental illness. If, as some scholars think, Mary Magdalene might also be associated with the woman in Luke 7 with a bad name who anointed Jesus' feet while he was at dinner in Simon's house, washing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. If Mary Magdalene is indeed a person from a good family who suffered from some severe mental health issues, this being the case, we can imagine her as a tortured person, shunned perhaps by society, perhaps being unkempt and unloved. This unloved state may have resulted in her having been taken advantage of by those seeking use her for sexual gratification, driving her even further from the respectable members of society and enduring their stinging condemnation. If both of these are true, we can only imagine the tortured degradations she must have suffered and endured, and the real extent to which she bore the contempt of others. As one Biblical scholar has pointed out, given that it is mentioned that she had seven demons cast out, a number which is quite specific, that this either

meant that a number of exorcisms might have been carried out over a period of time, or that her restoration to health and respectability took place again over time.

All four gospels mention that Mary Magdalene was one of the women who was present when Jesus was crucified, watching from a distance even after the male disciples had all fled. Matthew and Mark specifically mention Mary Magdalene as having been present when Jesus was buried. Luke merely states that 'the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee were all present' without naming anyone. John's gospel does not specifically mention any women being present, mentioning only Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

All four Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene, either alone or as part of a group, discovered the empty tomb, although the details of the accounts differ significantly. John's gospel gives us the fullest account concerning Mary Magdalene where she meets the risen Jesus, thinking that he is the gardener. It is only when he calls her by name that she recognises him.

Mary Magdalene has often been referred to as being the 'apostle to the apostles'. Why was she, I wonder, the first to witness the empty tomb and the first to encounter the risen Jesus? Was it because she loved Jesus the most? Not necessarily, according to the gospels. Peter, as we know, is the one whom Jesus refers to as the rock, and on which the Church will be built, despite his threefold denial of his Lord. We are told that the Beloved Disciple had laid on Jesus' breast. James and John were also important as having been witnesses along with Peter to some events such as the Transfiguration not witnessed by the others. But what demarcates Mary Magdalene I suspect is the extent to which the grace of God is manifest through Jesus Christ. Mary was the person most on the edge of society, an outcast, the person who had suffered most, whether it was by living with severe mental health issues, or if she is to be identified as being the woman with the bad reputation. What we have in Mary Magdalene then, is broken humanity, a long way from what God intends and wishes for the people he has created. In Mary Magdalene we see the Kingdom being realised - the lowly raised, the outcast welcomed, the sick healed, the condemned restored. Perhaps it was most appropriate that the person who was the most broken was the first to witness the events of the resurrection because it was Mary Magdalene who was brought so low that the reality of God's grace would be made manifest. Even in the lowest state of death, Mary Magdalene is witness to God's grace bringing new life and restoration.

This is the mission and witness of the Gospel and which the Church is to proclaim. In a sense stained glass and depictions in art anaesthetise us to the reality of the situation and what actually went on. 'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven' – so we proclaim, my real fear however is this – two millennia later, in the established, institutionalised, increasingly (so we are told) middle class environment of the Church, if Mary Magdalene or someone like her, were to come along to this cathedral or to another church today to have an encounter with the living Jesus, would they even be allowed in?