

Sermon Feast of Mary Magdalene 2018

From the earliest of days, one of the great proofs of Christian faith was the reality of changed lives. Commitment to Christ brings about transformation which amazes and attracts people. In the early centuries of the church, the apologists (defenders of the faith to unbelievers) recognised this and used the reality of this transformation as one of their basic arguments in defence of the faith. At the heart of this is the idea that radical change which impacts people in real, life-giving ways points to divine power.

The pages of the church's history are full of people so changed: Saint Augustine, the sophisticated playboy running to the end of what philosophy and pleasure could bring, finally brought to his knees in faith. Saint Francis of Assisi, likewise abandoning the pleasures of youth for a whole-hearted embrace of the gospel. John Newton repentant of his life in the Atlantic slave trade and so inspired to write 'Amazing Grace'. The New Testament itself, of course, abounding with the stories of men and women changed by the encounter with Christ: Peter, who denied Jesus, who abandoned him at the end, to eventually lead the church and die for his Lord. Thomas, who was to doubt the resurrection but then to give the clearest most explicit confession in all the New testament, *My Lord and my God*, and who would bring the faith to India. Paul, once Saul, the great persecutor of the faith, to become the greatest exponent of Christian faith for the infant church. *The encounter with Jesus changes things*. To meet Christ is to be changed by him.

Today's celebration in honour of Mary Magdalen really showcases for us the transforming power of the encounter with Jesus. Many of you would be aware that there are few figures in the New Testament – beside Jesus himself – who has been the subject to so much misinterpretation, been so misrepresented and claimed for any number of purposes and political ends. But we actually know very little of her, which always invites creative attempts to fill in the gaps... And what we *do* know of her is cobbled together from different gospels which has meant little details from other stories have been added to hers. From Mark we learn that from her Jesus cast out seven demons. Luke tells us she was part of the company of women that followed Jesus and his disciples. Amongst these women she is identified as remaining at the foot of the cross. And as we hear in the Gospel today, she was the first witness to the resurrection. Beyond these scarce details the rest is mere conjecture and wishful thinking.

All the accumulated layers to her story, (that she was a prostitute, that she may or may not have been the woman who anointed Jesus with her hair, that she and Jesus enjoyed a bit of romance and she bore his children, that she is some sort of proto-feminist) need to be pushed away. The later layers of paint applied to her portrait, as it were, need to be scraped away, so that we actually remain *true to the record*. But importantly, what remains in that record illumines the essential theme of her life: *that she was changed* through her encounter with Jesus.

This transforming encounter certainly originated from her being delivered from evil spirits. She was diseased, but found herself healthy; possessed by malcontent forces, but then free to follow of Jesus. The seriousness of Mary's possession by demons is seen by their numbering seven which indicates an especially aggravated or violent form of possession, in other words a total, complete, debilitating condition. But the rest of her story – as it is known to us – unfolds *in response* to her being liberated from this; her life now determined by this radical, transformative moment.

The moment so impacts her, she leaves whatever her life had been up 'til then to follow Jesus. She is in every sense of the word a disciple: the one who follows. From various points in the Gospels we hear that a group of women – of whom Mary Magdalene is listed – follow Jesus. Importantly, they support the ministry financially, out their own resources. Now, if we want to see how Jesus has impacted *our* lives - how our encounter with him has transformed us - then one of the places to look is how we spend our money. It's very easy to spiritualise away our obligations and commitments to the faith, or to imagine it's someone else's issue and someone else is dealing with it all. If the church is just getting our leftovers, or there is no sacrificial cost to our giving, chances are we have not been properly converted to Christ! But Mary's transforming encounter with Jesus shows us there is a very practical, indeed material, cost to following Jesus.

But there's another cost as well. For Mary, the transforming encounter with Jesus brings her to his Cross. The true cost of following Jesus means going to the dark, troublesome, confronting places. And beyond the cross, as Matthew tells us, she even followed His body to the tomb and remained there. In other words, she went as far as was humanly possible! She followed Him to the very end. The life of the Christian is not about ease or convenience. But for Mary, she knew what Jesus had done for her and so wanted to go wherever he went.

As told us in the Gospel today, the transforming encounter with Jesus so changed Mary that when all the others had gone away she was still there! When the disciples came to the tomb of Jesus and found it empty, everyone went away except for Mary. She was faithful to Him, even when everyone else had walked away! Not easy for her, sure. *Four* times in the Gospel today is reference to her weeping! And in a way bringing her *back* to the place of darkness and desperation with which her story starts. But in the same way, this too becomes the springboard for another life-changing encounter, as she once again meets Jesus, who *himself* has now shaken off the forces of darkness. And what turns around the situation of grief and confusion is the simple speaking of her name: *Mary*. And this encounter with the risen Lord - as before - changes things. She is not permitted to cling, to hold onto this moment. Instead, Jesus charges her, *Go. Go and find the brethren and tell them...* And so she becomes, as the Orthodox have called her, *apostle to the apostles*: the one sent to those who are sent.

Today as we celebrate Mary Magdalene we are reminded of the very real power of God to transform lives. In her life we find realised St Paul's conviction that, *anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old creation has gone, and now the new one is here!* Jesus changes lives. In fact, we must say that encountering Jesus cannot leave us unchanged.

Often our lives unfold in patterns, cycles, rhythms. In a way the same for Mary. The last thing we know of Mary is really the same as the first thing we hear of her: that *the encounter with Jesus changes things*. Jesus delivering her from whatever dark forces held her in an earlier life changed the direction of her life. And then, from the depths of grief and confusion, encountering the risen Jesus once more changes the direction of her as Jesus charges her, 'Go.' Everyone who has met Jesus experiences a radical change. Sometimes the demands of this change are costly. Sometimes it requires us to go where we would rather not go. It requires of us to follow our Lord with faithfulness and devotion, not insisting on our own way, our own agenda. If our lives are unchanged after meeting Jesus, we have not met Jesus. Part of the task of Christian life is learning to recognise the hand of God at work in their lives, because in all of us there is a new creation. In this lay Mary's true legacy for which we rightly give thanks. We honour her because she shows us what it means to follow Jesus. And when all the strange things claimed for her are put to one side what remains is a new creation in Christ; the transforming encounter that is possible for all of us. Amen.