

St Mary Magdalen, Oxford, 2023

‘If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation’

St John does not explain to us why Mary Magdalen went to the tomb that morning, but he insists that it was very early, ‘while it was still dark.’ St Mark tells us that Mary’s purpose in going to the tomb was to anoint his body. She is frequently depicted holding a jar of ointment.

The implication is that the burial, on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, was too hasty to allow the proper preparation of the corpse. St John tells us that Nicodemus brought the myrrh and aloes, and it seems likely that Mary Magdalen was one of those who wrapped the body with the spices, before it was quickly transferred to the new tomb. Nevertheless, there may have been anointing-work still to do, at the next earliest opportunity, in the darkness before the dawn of the first day of the week.

Whether that body had been properly anointed or not, it was no longer in the tomb. He was already risen.

As with human life in general, this story is all a bit of a muddle: a perplexing betrayal, a chaotic arrest, a confusing series of trials, a troubled and thoroughly exasperated Roman Governor, an absurdly cruel execution, and a hasty burial on the eve of a high holy day. While John does his best to imbue it all with the sense of an assured, unfolding divine purpose, as a human story it is full of confused motives and unintended consequences; teetering between the ridiculous and the tragic.

Human life is a muddle, but sometimes, somehow, glorious things emerge.

It would be wrong of me to go into too much detail, but I don’t think it would come as a huge shock to any of you to learn that the preparations for the Coronation of King Charles III included a fair share of muddle – of plans having to be remade, of motives and interests that sometimes conflicted, and the best of intentions leading to unintended consequences.

One thing that we really did not expect to do in the Coronation service was to build a tomb around the King.

It was decided fairly early on that a fresh approach to the anointing was needed. Garter Knights carrying a golden canopy to shield the monarch from view, as in

1953, was felt to be out of kilter with the aim of greater diversity and inclusion within the ceremony. You will have noticed the lamentable lack of coronets and tiaras in the Abbey that day.

The secrecy of the anointing seemed like an important thing to maintain, not least so that the King could focus on this most sacred and private of moments without worrying about the millions who might be watching; so the idea of the anointing screen was born.

The first moment the prototype was used at a rehearsal in the ballroom at Buckingham Palace (yes, I know, sometimes I can't quite believe the things that come out of my mouth), it was an unforgettable moment. It was quickly reckoned that only soldiers could be relied upon to wield the three parts of the screen with any discipline and agility, and so six guardsmen dutifully wrestled the panels into place around the replica coronation chair (made for the co-regent Mary II), sealed the corners, and solemnly took their positions, facing outwards, with heads bowed. As many commentators reflected after the service, the soldiers' posture was precisely that seen around Her Late Majesty's catafalque during the lying-in-State in Westminster Hall. His Majesty was entombed.

The expression on The King's face, at that first rehearsal, as the screen closed around him, was one of extraordinary focus, even, I might dare to say, holy fear. The use of the screens had developed and intensified the symbolism around the anointing, in a way that no-one had really intended. The anointing now spoke not just of someone being chosen and set-apart, but of someone who had died and was being raised.

When Mary Magdalen came to the tomb of Jesus, she found the seal broken; the stone rolled away and the body gone. Her anointed Lord, the Christ, had, she thought, been taken from her. Only the linen graveclothes remained in the tomb. However, when she looked again, after Peter and the other disciple had been and gone, she saw not a tomb but the Temple; the place of the dead had become the Holy of Holies.

The biblical scholar Margaret Barker has suggested for many years now that some early Christians saw themselves as custodians of a secret teaching, a mystical knowledge, which related to the First Temple in Jerusalem. They

understood Christ and his sacrifice, not just in relation to the Passover, but as the fulfilment of the High Priestly tradition associated with the Day of Atonement – the day when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of sacrifice to restore the relationship between Yahweh and his people; between the creation its Creator. We see this High Priestly Christology especially developed in the letter to the Hebrews.

The Holy of Holies, first in the tent of meeting and later in the Temple in Jerusalem, represented (Barker suggests) a space beyond space and time; beyond creation; divine space. The veil before the Holy of holies represented the created, temporal order. Beyond the veil was nothing but the throne of God, the mercy seat or kapporet, set above the ark of the covenant, held up by two high-ranking angels (the cherubim). This Holy of holies could not be a safe space for mortals – for those whose life is limited, hampered, disfigured by sin and decay – such things could not endure when faced with the sheer vitality and holiness of God. To go into that divine space meant annihilation, becoming nothing, but it might also mean resurrection: mortal submission to that sheer vitality and holiness brought also the hope of sharing it – of dying and being reborn as a child of God. Any such person, returning through the veil, would now represent the divine life and presence in the world; a person reborn and gleaming; a new creation.

As the psalmist declares:

Noble are you on this day of your birth: On the holy mountain, from the womb of the dawn, the dew of your new birth is upon you.

King Solomon received his anointing, we think, on that mercy seat in the Holy of Holies – and was thereby reborn as priest and king, like the mysterious Priestly King who had blessed Abraham. As the psalmist also declares – you are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. The ‘dew of his new birth’ is the anointing that Zadok the priest administered – oil running over his head and down onto the collar of his clothing, like Aaron, the first High Priest. Monarchy and priesthood combine in this living symbol of the divine life and presence – the King is a new-born child of God, a new creation.

Mary came to the tomb to anoint the dead, but found it open and empty – a place of re-birth, of resurrection. The slab on which his body lay was now

flanked by angels, like the mercy seat, and he was out, with the dew of the dawn upon him; the anointed-one, the Christ, walking in the garden as the new, royal, high-priestly Adam; the true Son of God. He calls to Mary, naming her, as God invited Adam to do in the beginning – she too is a new creature in this new Eden.

Mary came while it was still dark, and as the darkness gave way to light, it was the first day of the new creation, of Eden restored by the one who had passed through the veil; who was annihilated by the Cross, and had now returned, trailing vitality and holiness from the empty sepulchre.

When His Majesty emerged from those screens, as they were dismantled around him, (like the stone rolled away), we saw him freshly-anointed, and clad in white, as a man reborn – even in his mid-seventies. Hope for us all!

We constructed a sepulchre around the King, and God made it a Holy of holies, because that is what God does; that is what God did with the tomb of Jesus – he made that sepulchre a space beyond space, filled and overflowing with his own vitality and holiness; if you will forgive the assonance, the tomb became a womb and from it issued a new King; a new creation.

This could sound highly fanciful, but we know that this is what God does because we have the witness of your patron, Mary; the first to witness the risen King of kings, with the dew of his new birth upon him; the High Priest who was passing into the heavens, to whom she could not, should not, hold on.

Out of the muddle and confusion of our Coronation preparations, something emerged. Rather unexpectedly, the Coronation became not just about one very privileged individual being anointed, chosen and set-apart, but a manifestation of our shared human dignity, vocation and destiny; a liturgical manifestation of the death and resurrection we all undergo in baptism, the anointing we all receive by the Holy Spirit, and the crowning of our lives with the hope of immortality. It became an expression of our shared hope of sharing in God's own vitality and holiness; of our common calling in Christ to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.

Through the muddle of human lives, the mistakes, the mixed motives, the tombs we fall into or tragically construct for ourselves or for others, God, we dare to believe, is at work, renewing us and all creation; surprising us, like Mary

at the tomb, like the Archbishop approaching a linen-clad king with spoon and ampulla; all who come in darkness to anoint the dead and discover, in Christ, a new creation. Alleluia.