

Patronal Feast of Mary Magdalen — St Mary Magdalen, Oxford

22 July 2018

Song of Songs 3.1-4/Ps 42.1-10/2 Cor 5.14-17/John 20.1-2,11-18

“Have you seen him whom my soul loves?”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – Amen

As Mary Magdalen puts off her heavenly nightclothes this morning, as she looks about and selects the proper attire for the patronal feast of her favourite church, she may wonder *what* people will be saying about her *this* time. The many different ways of representing the Magdalen arise in response to the very *few* things we can be confident that we know about her. As the gospels provide little incontrovertible detail inked into her picture, preachers, scholars, poets, sculptors, novelists, spiritual directors, and practically everyone who cares about Mary Magdalen ends up by colouring our patron according to *their own* lights, a projection of *their* desires, making her over into what they want her to be. We learn from these of Mary Magdalen’s admirers much less about *her* than we do about the people who want to tell us about her.

They want to tell us about *their* Magdalen, the saint who represents *them*, close to the heart of Jesus. Many recognise themselves in her experience of alienation and desperation — to the point of possession, as indeed a home in *multiple* demonic occupation — and they bring their distress, loneliness, anxiety to offer alongside of hers, that they may be exorcised by the Lord who drove seven demons from her. Others recognise in her a faithful witness to the gospel, a path-finder whose truthful witness the male apostles discounted until they had seen for *themselves* that Jesus had risen (her report was, after all, **NSBM** — Not Spoken By a Man), and they will bring the persistent burning ache of being sidelined, ignored, disrespected by mediocre male colleagues, to offer alongside Mary’s own frustrations with the twelve old boys, so that the Risen Lord might recognise these overlooked women and *say their names*. Others want the Magdalen who was reputed to be a sexy woman of the world, whose supposedly scandalous past may reassure them that their own woeful relationships,

their unfortunate dating history, the bad reputation about which they may or may not care has nonetheless not spoiled them for Jesus' love. And some identify with Mary on the basis that, quite apart from any particularly lewd faults attributed to her, she has been known as someone who had been especially sinful; such that people who carry a burden of sin, and who want to gather up the weight of their variegated transgressions alongside those that Mary may have borne, they come to the Jesus who promises 'Therefore, I tell you, her sins' — *their* sins — 'which were many, have been forgiven'. Tormented, bypassed, tainted, guilt-ridden: many attach themselves to a Magdalen who speaks for them, who stands by their side, who embraces them with pride, who will kneel beside them at confession. And to all who long for such a Magdalen, I say: *God bless you*; you long for a holy, healing, heartening saint to strengthen you. And if you turn to Mary as your patron because you are a glovemaker, or a perfumer, or a hairdresser, a pharmacist, a tanner, a resident of Arahah (Andalusia), or if you have come here this morning with no particular attachment to Mary Magdalen at all — perhaps you've always preferred St George, or St Catherine, or some other patron, or not really cared much *who* was the patron of your church, this *not* being a World Cup of patron saints (in which Gary Lineker notes 'Oh, St Frideswide has a tough draw in Group Ω , she'll have to get through Isidore and a resurgent St Michael's side'). *Whatever* brings careworn souls to the shelter to which Mary Magdalen leads us is fine with God.

But this morning, the Mary who brings you here has chosen raiments that befit her patronage of a holy place built in her name. If you cast your gaze about you this morning, you may almost recognise, catch a glimpse of her. Perhaps she chose clashing colours and ripped, threadbare cloth to reflect her soul's past torment; or the assertive, severe look of the Apostle to the Apostle who has run out of *fings* to give about the bumbling boys who build elaborate systems and structures to suppress her testimony; perhaps Mary has come to her patronal dressed as if to an after-hours club, or on the other hand dressed in the muted shades of a someone whose sins have coloured her with more than enough vividness for one lifetime. But she joins us clothed not in the style of our desires, but dressed in the glory of the Lord who created her, who has known her from the beginning, and who honours her in his kingdom.

Whatever your personal connection to Mary Magdalen, the import of St Mary for us *as a congregation* this morning — that which we all share in venerating her — derives

not from identifying *individually* with her afflictions, her oppression, her sexuality, or her sin, but from all of us united with her in her *love for Jesus*. As we hear in this morning's gospel lesson, when confronted with the emptiness of the tomb, Peter and the special disciple shrugged and went home; but Mary stood outside the tomb, sobbing. Understanding the tomb to be empty, she bent over again to look inside. Turning away from the angels, she confronted her God and her Lord, our God and our Lord, and all that she could see was a groundskeeper: 'If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'

And yes, persistent heedless sin can prevent us from recognising the Lord. Anxiety and distress can blind us to loved ones who would do anything to help. For *whatever* reason, Mary's eyes were kept from recognising the Lord, but all she could ask this strange man was how he could help her find Jesus. 'I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not.'

But perhaps Mary didn't recognise her Saviour because she assumed she would find *another* Jesus, a Jesus who looked more like the wandering Galilean whom she had known before. Desire often enough deceives our perception: we see what we *expect*, or *want* to see rather than letting the world we encounter *change* our desires. Perhaps Mary wanted *more of the same* Jesus who had cast out demons, who forgave sinners, who washed the feet of those who followed him — the *same* Jesus, not the *unexpected divine* Jesus whom death could not contain. When he asked for whom she was looking, she was still expecting the mortal remains of a prophet from Nazareth. Yet when he but spoke her name — 'Mary' — she found him whom her soul loved, she would hold him, and would not let him go.

As in St Luke's Gospel the breaking of the bread, the pivotal moment in the ritual of the Lord's presence, enabled the occluded Emmaus disciples to recognise Jesus, so in St John's Gospel it is the *calling-by-name*, anticipated in Jesus's self-characterisation as the Good Shepherd, that opens our eyes to the One whom we seek with tears. 'Mary'; 'Peter'; 'Lucy'; 'Nigel'. 'He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out,' 'as if to say, Recognise Him, who recognises thee [Gregory the Great, *Hom. xxv*].' Recognise and love the one who recognises and loves you.

Jesus *recognises* and *loves Mary Magdalen*, not some projection of *our* desires, *our* longings and insecurities. Without reservations about her past, her attitude, her mental health, Jesus recognises *her*, and in so doing promises that he recognises *us*

and loves *us* as well. All the speculation and rumours about Mary simply don't enter into the picture, just as they didn't enter into the picture when Jesus was meeting Nathanael or conversing with the Samaritan woman at the well or challenging Nicodemus. Jesus knows all people, what is in their hearts, and calls us by name *along* with Mary Magdalen to receive him, to adore him, to be healed and forgiven, and to make known his glory in all the world.

This Mary Magdalen whom we seek is not to be found in beach holiday bestsellers or arid academic texts. She has clothed herself with the dawn and come among us, be-dewing us with the refreshment of Jesus's love and reminding us that his love *recognises* us as we are and *draws* us ever closer to him. We have gathered under her patronage, and she greets us with relief and healing. We catch sight of her, barely recognised, in the sparkle of a another's smile, in the tear that escapes our neighbour's eye, in the calloused hand that wishes us God's peace. We see her, if we let go our *desires*, what she *must be like*, for what we need from her, and allow the Magdalen to shine with the resplendence of divine mercy, of limitless love, of the peace that passes all understanding. May each of us, *all* of us *together*, recognise and give thanks for the distinctive gifts by which Mary glorifies God; and may she pray for us, for this holy place, and for the continuing proclamation of the healing, liberating, rapturous, forgiving gospel in this blessed city, until we join her in the company of heaven —

Amen