

## **Searching – Being Found – Bearing Witness**

**The Rt Reverend Humphrey Southern**

Shear away the Titian tresses and turn away from the expanses of white flesh loosely swathed in rich, red fabrics so beloved of Renaissance painters; put away the titillation of a shady and disreputable past; abandon unbiblical associations with alabaster jars of ointment or the household of Lazarus and Martha at Bethany; and (still more) sit light to elaborate traditions involving a post-biblical existence in Ephesus or Provence – and what is left to inspire our thinking and our response to Mary Magdalen?

The answer may be less ornate than that provided by an account made up of all these associations and accretions, but it is nonetheless powerful in its simplicity, and challenging to you, who enjoy Mary Magdalen's patronage, and to all of us who keep her feast at this season.

A woman who searched. A woman who was found. And a woman who told, who bore witness.

It's all there in the familiar twentieth chapter of John's Gospel that we heard read this morning, and it's all there, also (or nearly all there) in that haunting, suggestive, urgent poetry read from the Song of Solomon and set as the context in which to reflect on the Gospel and Mary's part in it.

A woman who searched. *'I will rise now and go about the city in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves'*. [Song of Sol. 3. 2] This is Mary who came early, while it was yet dark, through the sleeping city to the desecrated tomb to search for the one she loved.

A woman who was found. *'Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him and would not let him go...'* [3.4]. Yet in the Magdalen's case it was her who was found, rather than who did the finding, when the unidentified gardener uttered her name – 'Mary!' – and she was known.

A woman who told, who bore witness. *'I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of*

*her that conceived me.*' [4.4] – the woman who bears witness, bringing news of the Risen Lord to the devastated household of those who had loved him with those earth-shattering words, 'I have seen the Lord!'

A woman who searched. A woman who was found. And a woman who told, who bore witness.

Simpler, plainer, less picturesque than the story that has grown up around her, yet a pattern and a model, nevertheless (and perhaps a better one for its simplicity), given us in your patron whom we celebrate today. A pattern of faithful discipleship embodied in the saint who intercedes for you, who is present for you in the deep places of God's heart, who enables your prayers and worship, a pattern given as challenge and inspiration on this her feast day.

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There is something very arresting about that image of a woman alone in the dark, deserted pre-dawn streets, in the danger, where the disreputable resort, searching and yearning for

that which she cannot find, that which is lost and yet of inestimable value: the departed lover, the entombed Lord.

It is a very tidy, rational kind of religion that explains first (or claims to explain) and then – on the basis of that – looks for devotion and commitment. Sometimes, no doubt, the dynamic does work like that. But, as anyone who has ever been in love, especially anyone who has ever been hopelessly in love, will attest, by no means always. Longing – foolish, dangerous longing; helpless, driven longing; that which nags and nags and will not let you rest easy in bed – often comes first and drives strongest, so much so that satisfaction of the longing becomes somehow less important than the urge to immerse, to explore, to wander the streets ...

Our doors, the doors of all our parish churches are always open – need always to be open – to this kind of searching, to searchers like these for the instinct to search and to long is a holy one and a life-giving one, quite independent (I would suggest) of the provision of any answer or solution. A woman who searched.

And a woman who was found. It is not that her searching (necessarily) was rewarded, or that she found what she was looking for. Indeed, in the glorious humour of the story Mary did not recognise the object of her searching even when she met him – ‘Sir, if you have carried him away ...’

Yet he found her. ‘Mary!’ We, who (as it may seem with some arrogance) say, or allow it to be said of us, that we ‘have faith’, as if this were something we had found, recognised and picked up, need rather to reflect rather more often and assiduously on the faith and faithfulness that has found us.

Sometimes we are able to be confident of this, and have account to give of it in our Scriptures, doctrine, sacraments and testimony, and sometimes the realisation slips away and what was clear and recognisable becomes opaque and shrouded. The guide becomes again the gardener. Yet Mary’s story is our promise: salvation and hope, sense making and reassurance, are a

function not of our capacity to see, to ‘get’, to know, but of the fact that Christ the Risen Lord, however opaque to us, or shrouded, reaches out and knows us and calls us by name. ‘Mary!’

A woman who was found is a vital corrective, as a patron, to a Church that may otherwise feel that it has ‘got it’.

And finally, inspiration to bear witness. ‘I have seen the Lord’ is the creed – Mary’s creed – that animates and shapes all our worship and all our story. This and every Mass, surely, is our declaration, ‘I have seen the Lord’.

For we see him broken, glorified, risen and exalted. We see him here in the Host fractured and lifted up, and we receive him in our hands and on our lips in order that we may be sent out to bear witness to the experience.

To bear witness: not to *explain* it, though we are bound to explore and to wonder – that is our theology. Nor to *privatise* it, though we are bound to internalise the experience and feed on it – that is our spirituality. Nor to *emblematis*e it, making

a kind of banner around which to rally the like-minded, though we are bound to gather into the Body of Christ all whom he has found – this is our ecclesiology.

To bear witness. It is this assertion, *'I have seen the Lord'*, the creed at the heart of worship, that returns us to the Magdalen's cycle of faithful discipleship. Searching – Being Found – Bearing Witness.

We have seen the Lord and so we search for him. We search for him in the world of Grenfell and Mosul, in the world of our relationships, our loves and betrayals and indifferences, in our buying and selling and ignoring, in our delights and our service – and it is in this world, often unrecognised by us, in the guise of the gardener, that Christ comes and finds us, renewing in us the calling to go out and tell.

Searching – Being Found – Bearing Witness: the pattern of your patron. Amen.