

Good Friday Three Hours Devotion
Blessed are those who mourn: Mary Magdalen
Fr Peter Groves

Matthew 5:4

Matthew 27.55-end

At last, at the last, at the end of the story, the women get a look in. Those who have followed him all the way from Galilee, those who have been given none of the grandiose promises of thrones and glory and judgement, those who have heard nothing of the bread which is his body, those who have not had the privilege of intimacy on the mountain of the Transfiguration or in the garden, those who have not fallen asleep when told to stay awake and watch, those who have not turned and fled, those who have not sought warmth by the fire and refuge in denial and ignorance, those who have not fallen away: now at last, the gospel tells their part.

What do they do, in this most tragic of stories, what do they add to this most dramatic of scenes? Nothing.

They contribute nothing. They say nothing. They do nothing, because there is nothing to be done. Nothing is their context, because they join the story in emptiness and in absence. There is nothing left to do, because there is nothing left. Where there was life, there is only its opposite. Where there was hope, there is only its absence. Where there was truth, there is only the falsehood of death. Truth and its opposite become one and the same, because truth is dead, because death is true, and so the absence of truth is now the truth which prevails. Falsehood and emptiness and lifelessness prevail. Life is transfigured into death.

What do they see, these women who are looking on from afar. What is there for them to behold? Nothing and everything. Nothing, because the banality of another criminal death will be followed through with all the empty routine of the utterly ordinary. The lifeless body is taken from the cross, the place of death is prepared and ready, the corpse is entombed and then sealed, a double irony of presence and absence, for who on earth needs to seal a tomb, what on earth could they possibly fear? Of course we hear the mutterings of the authorities, and the pleas for the

watch and the seal lest the body be stolen away. But who in their right mind could want to steal death? What is the use, the value, of nothing? Nothing, of course, is the answer.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Death is inescapable, and so it is strange how very determined human beings seem to do their very best to escape it. Our fear of its real inevitability, our embarrassment at speaking its name, our reluctance to confront its onset even in the presence of those who know themselves to be dying, all these are so basic to contemporary human behavior and at the same time so ludicrously unnatural. Nothing is more natural than death, nothing is more normal, nothing is more real. And yet nothing is more fearful, nothing is more to be avoided.

Blessed are those who mourn. To mourn is to refuse this illusion of escape. To mourn is not the same thing as to grieve, it is not the involuntary response of heart and mind to a loss we cannot completely comprehend. It is to acknowledge that loss and that lack of comprehension by doing some specific things. In part, this will mean feeling and thinking differently, but it

will also involve particular thoughts and actions which fulfil what it means for us to mourn. Such practices will be different in different cultures and contexts, but we can all relate to some aspect of mourning, be it public or private. To mourn is to acknowledge death, whether we like it or not.

Why is this important? There are too many reasons to numerate here, but one of them, and a central one, is precisely this acknowledgement. Unless we embrace and confront death – the death of a loved one, the death of the innocent, the death which comes to us all – then we have acknowledged only partially the gift of life. Life in its fullness must include its ending, or else there will be some part of life which we have somehow omitted. The life of Christ is transmitted through Matthew's Gospel largely through a depiction of his maturity and ministry. But we are also told of its origins and of his beginning. There was suspicion and innocence in those origins, just as there is condemnation and innocence now; there were Gentiles acknowledging him as the Son of God, there was cruelty and persecution and judicial killing. And there were women, embracing it all.

Now at the end of Jesus' life, it is the women, also and coincidentally called Mary, who do what no-one else seems capable of. *"There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among whom were Mary Mag'dalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zeb'edee."* Mary Magdalen, transformed by the presence of Christ, has remained faithful, showing the world what will become the pattern of apostolic life, placing herself and keeping herself in the presence of the Lord even when that presence is extinguished by death. She is joined by two mothers, another Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the Sons of Zebedee, she who earlier in Matthew's gospel had come forward with the petition that her sons be exalted to the glory of sitting at the right and left hand of the Lord. As she stands, looking from afar at the lifeless corpse hanging in between the two criminals, that maternal ambition looks distinctly less inviting, as at the left and right hand of Jesus we see two more victims gasping out their breathless lungs in death.

The mother of Zebedee's sons now disappears from the scene, as the two Marys take centre stage. And, as if

the birth of Jesus were the exact mirror of his death, we now find another Joseph at the heart of the story. This Joseph comes from Arimathea. *Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed. Mary Mag'dalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre.*

There has been a lot of sitting in Matthew's narrative of the passion. Jesus was sitting at supper with his disciples when he said those strange things about his body and his blood. Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard when they challenged his identity and he – having been given that identity anew by the one he confessed as the Christ – denied not just who Jesus was but, in so doing, who he himself was, refusing his own identity as he sat outside the judgement hall. Inside that hall, Pilate would sit on the judgement seat and readily absolve himself of his responsibility for the fate of the prisoner who stands in front of him, the prisoner who has spoken of the Son of Man who will be sitting at the right hand of power when few will abide the day of his coming.

Few will abide the day of his coming, and few have abided it, few have remained. All forsook him and fled. The sun has refused to shine. The veil of the temple has refused its own purpose and torn itself two. Even the bodies of the dead have left their resting places and wandered about the city whilst this disordering of earth and heaven is brought to fruition here and now, in this time and this place. Few have abided, few will abide. But Mary Magdalen, and the other Mary, these two abide. These two remain, watching from afar, and at the last sitting opposite the tomb.

And that is all that they are doing. Sitting opposite the tomb. Abiding, waiting, remaining. Being present, while everyone and everything has fled to nothingness. They remain, being present, with nothing. With the nothing that they have to bring, with the nothing that they have to do, with the nothing that everything has become in the death of life itself and the unmaking of creation. Blessed are those who mourn, for these two women, just by sitting and doing nothing, are doing absolutely everything, doing all that they can, embracing the nothing that everything has become and enacting it in the absence of their actions. There is nothing left to do, and so they do nothing. But only

they are properly doing nothing, because only they have remained present to nothing, have accepted the reality which is unreality, have understood that everything has to become nothing in order for nothing to become everything.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. What comfort is there in nothing, what assurance is there in absence? The tomb is sealed, the watch is set, the die is cast, the final act is played out. Only they remain, and only they truly mourn. And by that mourning, only they understand. For no-one can be mourned unless there is someone to mourn it, nothing can be seen unless someone is present to see it. Here they sit, and here they see nothing.

Except of course that they don't. They do see something. They see a tomb, sealed, guarded, safe and secure. They see the something which has embraced and enclosed nothing. They do nothing, so as to see something. They sit, and watch and wait. They sit, and watch and wait, and learn. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. There will come a time when there is truly nothing to see. There will come a time when they look for presence and find only

absence, when they look for closure and find empty space, when they look for something and are confronted with nothing. That nothing, the true nothing of absence, the emptiness of death which is the source of all true life, that nothing will be then for them the everything of eternity. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.