

Mary Magdalene, 22nd July 2018

Today, as you'll have noticed, is St Mary Magdalene's day. Who was she? And who was she *not*? Well, she was not the unnamed woman who anointed the head of Jesus with precious ointment in the house of Simon the leper, outraging the onlookers at the waste of money.

Nor was she the woman in a somewhat similar incident in the house of a Pharisee. There, an unnamed 'sinner from the city' washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair, then anointed his feet. This provoked a different response: the Pharisee thought he'd caught Jesus out - a real prophet would have realized she was a sinner and recoiled from her touch. Instead, Jesus takes her over-the-top devotion as a sign of so much gratitude for being forgiven so much sin. Neither of these events has any support in the Gospels to suggest that the woman in question was Mary Magdalene.

However this second woman (the reformed sinner) just *might* be the same person as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Confusion arises because this Mary (the Mary who had sat at Jesus's feet while Martha slaved away in the kitchen) is said in John's Gospel to have on some occasion to have taken a pound of very costly perfume and anointed Jesus's feet, then wiped them with her hair. Similarities, and differences.

Some cold-hearted commentaries see this last incident as one of John's editorial devices, a sort of compound of the other two, fitted neatly into his narrative as the immediate prelude to Jesus's triumphal Palm-Sunday entry into the Holy City - as the anointed King, the Messiah! Well, literal truth or theological construct - it was still not Mary Magdalene!

Now, everything we hear about Mary, Martha and Lazarus happened on their home territory in and around Bethany, very close to Jerusalem. *Our* Mary, presumably 'of Magdala', a village on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, had come into the story some time earlier, while Jesus and the twelve were *miles* away, right up north in the Galilee region. She first appears in Luke chapter 8, as they start to move around different villages. With Jesus and the twelve are also, it says, 'some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities - Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out, and Joanna wife of Herod's steward... and many others, who provided for them out of their own resources.' Having seven demons was *not* seen as evidence of sinful, immoral behaviour, merely very odd behaviour; and anyway she was certainly not 'from the city'. Mary Magdalene as a reformed prostitute is pure speculation. Or impure speculation - the stuff of nineteenth century fiction. We'd see her problem as a mental health one.

This female support staff stayed the course right up to Jerusalem, even to the Cross, watching first 'from a distance' (Luke), then (John) 'standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene'.

Clearly, even if she had not given any anointing, she was still an extremely close disciple. She'd be one of those who went to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea was having the body laid; and among those who went to prepare the spices and ointments before the Sabbath began.

Then, very early on the first day of the week, Mary went to the tomb but found it empty, so she hurried back to tell the apostles. She returned with Peter and John, and stayed when they left, peering again into the tomb. Something made her turn round, and she saw a man she didn't at first recognize. And then unfolds that beautiful account of her being called by name, and realizing she is seeing Christ risen. Yes, this is her much-loved Jesus; yet he is not quite the same - no longer to be held, not clung to, but known now in a different way - Jesus, whom we sometimes see, not physically yet clearly; and sometimes he has vanished. Yet is there still, unseen.

Yes, he is the same Jesus, the one who accepts and values - who *needs* the help and backup of his support group and their resources, people who would have seemed worthless in worldly eyes: women, with physical, emotional and psychic problems. He brings them healing. The ones behind the scenes - not stars who get adulation, but those who quietly get on and do the tasks that make it all work. He loved and appreciated Martha as well as Mary, and was only saddened at her distracted anxiousness in her tasks. He values them all, affirms their worth. They are as necessary as the twelve, a real and varied community around Jesus.

And yes, it is the same Jesus who does not scorn inappropriately extravagant gifts and over-emotional gestures, if they are moved by genuine loving devotion. Rather, he transforms them by finding deeper meaning like 'anointing him - in advance of his burial', his 'precious death'. And anointing him as the true King, of the spiritual Israel. And to those who stand by him at the cross, who are 'not ashamed to confess their faith in Christ crucified', he does grant some sight of his risen presence, even if for the most part we are slow to recognize him.

Mary had travelled a long way, from madness to such open-hearted love that she became the first to see the risen Christ, and so became the 'Apostle to the Apostles.' Like her, we can only fulfill our role in conveying the Good News, not by verbal eloquence or learnt skills or dogged determination, but by love - the gift Jesus gives for us to share.

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