

## Sermon for Sunday 22.7.18

Today we celebrate the feast of Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene is considered a saint by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican churches.

Mary Magdalene's role in the mission of Jesus was that of a teacher and apostle.

She was a model in terms of her understanding of what was needed for her personal growth in accordance with Jesus teachings about love, grace and self-giving.

According to author, theologian and priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, Mary earns her place among the apostles, because of all Jesus's students, she is the one who best catches the full meaning of his teachings in terms of becoming whole through personal transformation and inner awakening.<sup>1</sup>

She is the one that is best able to "walk the talk".

We know very little about Mary's personal details such as her age, status or family. Her name suggests that she came from the town called Magdala.

One source notes that one Jewish text which mentions Magdala, says that the town Magdala is judged by God and destroyed because of the immorality of its subjects.

It is possible that such a description of the town Magdala is the origin of the idea that arose in western Christianity that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

In western art, literature and theology, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as a prostitute who meets Jesus, repents of her sins, and pours oil on his feet in a gesture of humility, penitence and gratitude.

She is sometimes depicted kneeling at the foot of the cross, hair unbound, emphasising the sinful past from which she can never quite escape.

Andrew Lloyd Weber presented her as a reformed prostitute in the 1970's smash Broadway musical Jesus Christ Superstar highlighting her previous profession in the words of Mary's song, "I don't know how to love him."

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault. The Meaning of Mary Magdalene, Shambhala: Boston. 2010.

Now the tradition of Mary Magdalene as the archetypal penitent prostitute, can be dated to a sermon preached by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Dorothy Ann Lee, professor of New Testament Studies, writes: *there are a confusing number of women called "Mary" in the gospels and we might assume Pope Gregory was tired of distinguishing between them so he reduced them to two: on the one hand, there is Mary, the mother of Jesus, perpetual virgin, symbol of purity and goodness, and, on the other, Mary Magdalene, promiscuous woman of ill repute, symbol of feminine evil from which the world must be redeemed.*<sup>2</sup>

In reality, not once in the New Testament does it mention that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute or a sinner. What is recorded in the gospels is that she was a woman who had 7 demons, and that Jesus cast them out, helped her through this tough time of inner cleansing and then she followed him. It may be of interest to know that the number 7 in biblical language can denote wholeness and holiness.

All four gospels tell us that Mary followed Jesus from Galilee, stayed with him along the way witnessing his ministry, to the very day that she visited the empty tomb.

She was there at the crucifixion when they drove the nails into his hands and feet and was present when they cast lots for his clothes.

She was there when Jesus gave his mother into the care of the disciple he loved, and there when he spoke the words, *It is finished*, and gave up his spirit.

She stayed with the deceased Jesus until just before dark, when two men, Joseph and Nicodemus lifted him down from the cross, wrapped him in linen grave clothes and placed in the garden tomb.

Only then did she return to the place Peter and John and all the others were hiding.

And now we pick up the events of today's gospel reading from John.

The day after the Sabbath, on Sunday, in the early hours of the morning Mary returns to the tomb. When Mary discovers that the stone has been moved, she fears that someone has taken the body.

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2. Dorothy Ann Lee, <http://theconversation.com/friday-essay-who-was-mary-magdalene-debunking-the-myth> accessed 17.07.18

She runs and tells Peter and the other disciple. The two run to the tomb and Peter goes in and finds the linen cloth lying there and the cloth that covered his head lying on its own – implying that the body had been stolen and defiled. The men “saw and believed” that the body had been taken, because as yet they did not understand the scripture. Perhaps assuming theft the men returned to their homes.

Mary also had returned to the tomb but she didn't leave when the men did. She remained there - weeping outside.

She bent over and looked into the tomb where she saw two angels in white who spoke to her and when she poured out her fears—

*They have taken away my lord and I do not know where they have laid him,* she turned and she saw Jesus standing there supposing him to be the gardener.

It is then that he spoke to her and called her name: Mary.

She immediately knew that it was him - Rabouni / teacher she answers. He tells her to go and tell the others, which she does, announcing his resurrection with those wonderful words: ***I have seen the Lord.***

Mary thereafter is known as the Apostle to the Apostles for she announced to the others the resurrection of our Lord.

This story, I believe, is one that describes the complete beauty of the Christian faith. There is grace, drama, personal encounter, intimacy, loyalty, steadfast love that overcomes all barriers even death, and eternal unity.

In Jesus, Mary Magdalene, through her extraordinary courage and devotion to Jesus, had found him whom her soul loves. She understood his teachings, responded to them and had come into her true self.

She knew him as he knew her and her human sense of longing to know and to be known was fulfilled.

The story of Mary Magdalene and the union between her and Jesus Christ offers us all hope I believe, for as the Risen Lord called Mary by name, he calls you and he calls me – as he knew her personally, he knows you and he knows me.

May we, like Mary, invite him into our hearts as him whom our soul loves.

The Lord be with you.