

MARY MAGDALENE

Today is the feast day of Mary Magdalene. Some of you might remember the storm back in 2003 over the book by Dan Brown called the Da Vinci Code. I did manage to read the first 50 pages before giving up. It was panned by the critics for its writing style. The church condemned it because the book claimed Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife, was at the Last Supper, was pregnant, gave birth and went to live in France-if I remember the plot. Those of you with very long memories might recall a book called "Holy Blood and Holy Grail"(in 1982)which more or less had said the same thing. Brown's publishers were sued for plagiarism-but lost. Brown's book sold 80 million copies and was turned into a film with Tom Hanks-which I never saw!

So, what can we say about Mary Magdalene? The problem is that she has been so misrepresented over the centuries. One of the early popes claimed that she was a prostitute and the label has stuck despite there being no evidence in the Bible. This misconception has found its way into films like Jesus Christ Superstar and The Last Temptation of Christ. Even Lady Gaga perpetuated the myth in her song "Judas". In lots of medieval paintings Mary Magdalene is portrayed in a red dress- a scarlet woman. I remember going up to London in 2018 and seeing lots of posters advertising a new film called "Mary Magdalene"(with Rooney Mara in the title role) which tried to reverse this misconception and showed her as Jesus' closest disciple (another film I've not seen!)

So how had this come about? And who was Mary Magdalene and why should we celebrate her feast day? It seems, because Mary was a common name at the time, Mary Magdalene became confused with Mary of Bethany who anoints Jesus' feet and with the sinful woman who also anoints His feet. Horror of horrors, she even wiped Jesus' feet with her hair-another sign of a loose woman because women were not allowed to let down their hair in public .In the Catholic church, she has the role of the penitent sinner and is the patron saint of wayward women!

Mary Magdalene appears 12 times in the gospels. She was the woman from whom 7 demons were removed- perhaps a forerunner of the 7 deadly sins? She is given a leading role in the crucifixion and resurrection and was obviously quite well off because she and the other women supported Jesus' ministry "out of their resources". At the empty tomb she was a witness to the resurrection. She did not recognize Jesus until he said her name-Mary-which takes you back to John where the sheep recognize the shepherd by his voice. She calls him "Rabboni" which the text translates as "teacher" but it is far more than this. In

Judaism Rabboni is a term Jews use in addressing God. Mary realises who Jesus is. She, a woman, had realised the divinity of Christ.

What was most important was that she went and told the disciples what she had seen-she, a woman, became a missionary. She was known as "the apostle to the apostles" in an age when women's role was downplayed and their testimony in court was only worth half a man's. The message for our times of course is that women can be trusted just as much as men to carry on the teaching of Jesus despite the ruckus over the ordination of women back in 1992. There was, though, tension about her amongst the disciples. If you look at the Gospel of Mary, one of the Gnostic gospels (available in all good bookshops or on-line), Mary is portrayed as the only one who truly understood Jesus' teachings. Peter is reported as saying: "Master, we cannot endure this woman who gets in our way and does not let any of us speak, though she talks all the time" and also "Did he really speak with a woman in private without our knowledge. Did he prefer her to us?" Jealousy?

The other important thing about Mary Magdalene is the words that Jesus spoke to her at the resurrection. He said, "Do not cling to me". We do not have the physical body of Jesus with us so we cannot cling to his earthly image. As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and believe". If you go to the National Gallery look out for Titian's picture of this- it is called "Noli me tangere"(do not cling to me)-an amazing picture as are many of the paintings about Mary Magdalene.

So today, remember Mary Magdalene and see her as a devoted disciple of Jesus, an apostle who spread the word about Him and perhaps the forerunner of women's ministry - not as a prostitute or a loose or fallen woman wearing a red dress!

Christ has no hands but ours to carry on his work

God bless,

Jeff