

Sermon: Mary Magdalene 2007

At last I've got round to reading *The Da Vinci Code*. Sophie on holiday from boarding school discovers her grandfather in the middle of a pagan sex rite. A *pagan* sex rite, you notice. Not to be confused of course with a *Christian* sex rite. I love these fine distinctions. Someone else poisons another nonentity by lacing his cognac with peanut powder and producing anaphylactic shock. You have to laugh. And the beloved disciple on Jesus' right at the Last Supper is not St John but Mary Magdalene. I was expecting to read that Judas Iscariot entered a civil partnership with Harry Potter. And Alex Ferguson murdered by a posse of Chelsea supporters disguised as freemasons.

The Da Vinci Code asks us to believe that the Roman Catholic Church doesn't want us to know that really Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. One question: if it's true, how do you keep a secret like that for two thousand years? Someone would have spilled the beans before now surely? If Jesus and Mary had been married, then St Luke would have mentioned the fact; the gospel writers were not hung up about celibacy like the later Catholic Church. And the New Testament says that Simon Peter and the other apostles had wives. But actually in the case of Mary Magdalene the truth is much more fascinating than any fiction.

Is there a story in the gospels more tender than this morning's Gospel? Gregory the Great said of it, *As often as I think about this event, I am more disposed to weep over it than to preach upon it*. Mary Magdalene is one of the strongest characters in the New Testament. She is as passionate as Simon Peter – perhaps even more so. And volatile. And when she was young, she was more than a naughty girl. Scripture says that Jesus cast seven devils out of her. And seven devils is top of the Richter scale for wickedness. Seven devils are as bad as it gets. What outrageous courage she showed to burst unannounced into the house of an important Pharisee during a private dinner and throw herself at the feet of his chief guest. What passion!

She comes because she desires forgiveness. She wants to be clean, passionately. Yet Mary doesn't wait for the exorcism. Those tears she weeps over Jesus' feet are already tears of penitence. All the time she is washing him, it is she who is being cleansed. And the beautiful hair (which we are in no doubt was part of her seductive enterprises) she gives to him in the menial task of drying his feet. A dramatic bewildering aspect of this gospel is that all the time Mary is having such close contact with Jesus, he doesn't speak a word to her, nor she to him. Jesus' host Simon the Pharisee is silently choking over his olives and ciabatta at the whole disgraceful incident. Doesn't Jesus know that this is a woman of ill-repute? How dare a prophet allow himself to come into intimate contact with such a sinner?

Simon the Pharisee is self-righteous, but at least he's polite. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't criticise Jesus for entertaining this loose woman. But he's seething. Then comes that devastating remark of Our Lord's, full of humour, *Simon, I have something to say unto thee*. You can tell Simon knows what's coming next by his reply, *Master, say on*. And Jesus tells his parable. Imagine the scene. He says, *Simon, seest thou this woman?* But the word Our Lord chooses is not plain *woman*; it means, *This weak, silly woman*. So that was the origin of her sins: she was not lost forever because of them, but only weak and silly. Jesus, in this one-word compassionate description of her spiritual condition begins her redemption. *This woman hath not*

ceased to kiss my feet. She was still kissing his feet even while he was telling Simon the parable. What a picture! How poor Simon must have squirmed! Then Jesus turns to Mary at last and says only four words: *Thy sins are forgiven.* That's the exorcism. That's it. And out go the seven devils.

Mary believes him. And she never leaves him again. At the Crucifixion when the macho disciples, including Simon Peter, have denied him and run for their lives, Mary is to be found at the Cross. At the taking down of his body, she is there to anoint him. She was last at the Cross and first at the grave. *Some weak and silly woman eh!* And she is first at the tomb on Easter morning: *Then cometh Mary Magdalene, early, while it was yet dark unto the sepulchre.* You can hear her footsteps and her breathlessness in the very rhythm of those words. Did I say she wasn't wife to him? She was even more. This character of Mary Magdalene helps explain the extraordinary devotion of which women are capable. I don't care for all this unisexism and the ideological garbage that insists men and women are the same. They're not.

A woman has the feminine capacity – men, though we have other gifts, do not have it – the capacity to identify *physically* with the innermost part of the man she loves. There is touch not just in her fingers and hands but in her voice and in her glance. Her soul is touch. She is all touch. See in *The Song of Songs* he is the beloved and she is the outward appearance of his soul. The redemptive power of the woman is unique. *Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan. The eternal woman-soul leads us above.* And the *Ewig-Weibliche* is not just dirty old man Goethe's fantasy or the figment of Mahler's fevered imagination at the end of the *Eighth Symphony*. The literature, paintings and music of Christian civilisation are filled with this theme. She is the everlasting *Weib* – an insulting word in German – the redeemed whore.

Mary's need to touch is there on Easter morning. Passionately, she says to him she thinks he is the gardener, *Tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.* Minutes earlier she had conversed with angels at the tomb. But angels were not good enough for her. As Lancelot Andrewes says, *At the tomb, if she find an angel, if she find not her Lord, it will not serve. She had rather find his dead body than angels in all their glory.*

Jesus saith unto her, "Mary". She turned herself – and just dwell for a second on that "turn". *She turned herself and saith unto him, "Rabboni".* So now, beyond her wildest imaginings, she has her Lord – not his dead body – but alive. But at this climactic moment comes the bleakest bit – you couldn't make it up – : *Noli Me Tangere* – *Do not touch me! She would not be comforted, no not by angels, till she had touched him. And now "Touch me not!"* It is an indescribably painful moment: He whom she touched when she was yet a sinner, did he now reject her when she had proved her love to the death? She had touched his head, anointed him. She had dried his feet with her hair. She had kissed those feet without stopping all through the meal at Simon's house. She had prepared his body for burial. Why now this *Touch me not?* Was she perhaps being rather too enthusiastic? As Andrewes says, *Her tangere had a tang in it.*

No. The reason he tells her not to touch him is that she must go with all haste and testify to the disciples that he is risen. Mary is the first apostle, *apostolos apostolorum*, apostle to the apostles, the first to be sent to preach the gospel. She, the

fallen woman, is to preach to the apostles of Christ. *Touching Christ gives way to teaching Christ.* As by woman first came death, so by a woman came first news of the resurrection from the dead. Christ had prophesied in Simon's house that her care for him would be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. Think back to what she did there: *When time was she broke her box of precious ointment and the scent of it filled the whole house. The breaking of this box now, of the tidings of Christ and his rising, with the sweet savour of life unto life has filled, and still fills, the whole world, from one end to the other.* When she opened that alabaster box, she was opening her heart to him – and we must follow her example and do the same

It is the greatest drama, that meeting in the garden. Andrewes captures the breathless miracle of the moment of revelation in the garden on Easter morning He says, *The gardener had done his part: made her all green on the sudden.*