

Sermon for 22nd July 2018 (Eighth Sunday after Trinity - St Mary Magdalene)
2 Cor. 5: 14-17; John 20. 1-2, 11-18

Mary Magdalene is renowned for being the first witness of Christ's resurrection and, because Jesus sent her to tell the disciples about her encounter with him, effectively the first apostle. Let us look a bit more closely at what is known about her and try to separate fact from fiction or legend. John in his gospel refers to her as Mary the Magdalene, inserting the greek definite article; this indicates that she probably was born or lived in a town called Magdala. This name crops up in Matthew's gospel as being Jesus's destination by boat after a second instance of feeding a crowd. There was indeed a town called Magdala, or rather Magdala Nunnaya (meaning tower of the fishes), which functioned as a port on the west side of the sea of Galilee, about three miles north of Tiberias and six miles south of Capernaum. In archaeological excavations carried out this century, evidence of a settlement during the last two centuries BC and the first three centuries AD has been found, including the discovery of the oldest synagogue found in Galilee. So it would not be surprising if Jesus had visited that synagogue and perhaps had first encountered Mary there.

All four gospel writers refer to Mary Magdalene. The earliest reference comes in Luke's gospel in chapter 8, where he mentions her as one of three named women who accompanied Jesus in his ministry and supplied the party from their own resources. He also states that "seven demons had gone out" of her. All four writers report that Mary Magdalene visited Christ's tomb on the first day of the week following the sabbath (when it would have been against the law to go out even to visit a tomb). Matthew says she went with the other Mary, that is the mother of James and Joseph. Mark mentions these two and also Salome. Luke adds Joanna instead of Salome, but also refers to "other women". Only John specifies just Mary Magdalene, and he states that she first ran back to tell Peter and John that the tomb was empty and then returned to the tomb where she encountered Jesus. Perhaps the other women had been with her on her first visit but did not return with her. Jesus then commissioned her to go and tell "my brothers" what he had said to her. This she duly did, John referring to "the disciples" rather than "brothers". Because of this, by the third century she was referred to by the theologian Hippolytus as the "apostle of the apostles".

But Mary's identity became confused, since for one Pope Gregory the Great no less preached a sermon in 591 AD stating his belief that Mary Magdalene was the same woman as the penitent prostitute who anointed Jesus's feet with ointment according to Luke's gospel, and also as Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha, who anointed Jesus's feet with expensive perfume as related in John's gospel. Why the pope should have come to that conclusion beggars belief, but the idea appealed to artists in ensuing centuries who perpetuated this myth. What eventually became of Mary Magdalene is shrouded in mystery, with one tradition having her dying in Ephesus, with her relics being preserved in Constantinople, and another that she went to France and converted Provence to Christianity and her relics ended up in an abbey in Burgundy. No doubt one day all will be revealed. But for me, I go along with the theologian Hippolytus, that Mary Magdalene was the apostle of the apostles, as described by John in our gospel reading today; she was the one person who saw Jesus first after his resurrection and then was told by Jesus to go and tell the others the good

news which is the basis of our gospel today. Indeed one might describe her as the first Christian, because she was able to say “I have seen the Lord”.

Now reverting to the epistle, the short passage from his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is in effect summing up what it means to be a Christian. If we are able to say, as we do in the Creed, that we believe that Jesus died and then rose from the dead - accepting the first hand witness of Mary Magdalene - , then we have become a new creation in the sight of God. Christ’s love for each one of us, shown by his death for us on the cross, which makes us dead to sin, urges us on to live, not for ourselves, but for Jesus, and through him for others. All this was of course very real to Paul, since he too had seen the risen Jesus who had commissioned him to preach the good news, particularly to the Gentiles, ie non-Jews. So for him ‘everything old had passed away and everything had become new. Two thousand years on and not personally having had the experience of seeing the risen Jesus in the flesh, it is more difficult for us to come to terms with what it means truly to be a Christian. First and foremost it means that we should love God the Holy Trinity with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and secondly that we should show that love in our lives and in our dealings with all our neighbours.

If that sounds a tall order, we should take heart from the fact that God has sent into the world His Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us. With his guidance, each of us can look out for and offer a warm welcome to any stranger who comes among us; we can pray for others as well as for ourselves; we can tell others by our words and actions about the good news, the gospel, which is the bedrock of our faith and that offers to all the hope of a better world to come, when our Lord returns to the earth; and we can regularly review our financial affairs so that we are confident that we are giving sacrificially back to God out of the abundance of good things that he has given to us. Best of all we can reflect on the promise given to the first apostles that, just as Jesus had disappeared from their sight into heaven, one day he will return - and since we do not know when that day will be, we should be prepared for that event when indeed God will bring in His new creation.

Amen.