

Feast of Mary Magdalene 2018 Evensong

(22.07.18)

Zephaniah 3: 14 – end; Mark 15: 40 – 16:7

Today is the Feast of Mary Magdalene and she's kind of woman of the moment because earlier this year – January/February time a new film was released I think simply entitled Mary Magdalene. It was said the agenda of the film was to redeem Mary Magdalene's reputation and to demythologise the bad reputation she has. I've not seen the film, which is a pity because it would have been good to preach on it; but I have, for the purposes of this sermon read online Peter Bradshaw's review of it in the Guardian on 27th February which, actually makes me think perhaps I haven't missed that much after all.

The subtitle to Bradshaw's review is "Toothless attempt to overturn Sunday School myths." The opening paragraph says the film "sets itself a bold task: to rescue Mary Magdalene from an age-old tradition of

patriarchal condescension and misinterpretation. And yet it winds up embracing a solemn, softly-spoken and slow-moving Christian piety of its own." He describes Mary as "doing an awful lot of enlightened gazing at Jesus, who in turn does a good deal of infinitely knowing smiles back at her, while their dialogue is muted and restrained."

Bradshaw concludes that the film's toothlessness is an unintended consequence of attempting to avoid the other tradition, what he described as the "vulgar" tradition perpetuated in the Last Temptation of Christ and Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code, that there was sexual intimacy between Mary and Jesus. And the final sentence is: "What we're left with is a platonic apostlemance."

I'm rather ambivalent, though, about whether I want Mary Magdalene to be redeemed. Her reputation lends ammunition to support my mantra that Jesus kept bad company. That's my kinda Jesus. I don't

want an insipid Jesus. I want the kind of Jesus who can found, and found speaking the language of, places where there's addiction and despair and abuse and exploitation. I've never understood this correlation between Christianity and respectability; why it's thought that to be a Christian you have to be innocent and wet. I get sick and tired of going back the pub after a funeral and people making comment because I've got a pint in my hand. And it gets my goat – sorry, just indulge me while I go off on one – it gets my goat when we have a big concert here and we get a license and time and time again people are shocked because we're serving alcohol in church. And I just feel like swearing at them – because I bloody well can, and still be a Christian . . . even from the pulpit!

So part of me really wants to keep Mary Magdalene's reputation painted tart red. The tart with a heart is one of the most endearing literary figures; and I just wish we could cast Mary Magdalene in that role. But actually, Mary Magdalene's reputation does need

redeeming. Because there simply is no Biblical evidence to support this folk lore that Mary Magdalene was a fallen woman or a prostitute. The irony is that the Bradshaw review in the Guardian of the new film criticises it for not including Mary pouring ointment over Jesus' feet and wiping it with her hair. But the point is that the so-called omission is part of the demythologising of her reputation. That story comes in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Only in Luke is there any suggestion that the woman was a sinner and there is no identification whatsoever – either in the other two Gospels where she's not referred to as a sinner or in Luke – there is no identification of Mary as that woman. And yet we all think we know that the prostitute Mary Magdalene poured ointment over Jesus' feet, just as we think we know Jesus was born in a stable – although the Bible doesn't tell us so.

And this reputation is persistent. I wonder why the compilers of the contemporary lectionary – who ought to know better – pair this evening's New Testament

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reading with the Old Testament reading from Zephaniah, if it's not because of the verse "I will . . . gather the outcast and I will change their shame into praise." The implicit assumption is that Mary Magdalene is a shameful outcast.

There are two theories about how and why Mary Magdalene got this reputation. One is that there is a misogynistic madonna/whore ideology; that men can only cope with women being one or the other. So just as Mary the mother of Jesus is elevated onto a pedestal as this figure of anodyne piety – and if you've not read Colm Toibin's novel to bust that myth, I suggest you do – just as she's put on a pedestal, so there is a need for the other Mary to be put in the diametrically opposite position of a fallen woman.

And the other theory complements that. It's simply that in a patriarchal church men haven't been able to hack the prominence given to women in general and Mary in particular in the Gospels and have therefore

done everything they can to sling mud ta her and to make sure that mud sticks.

But it's all there in Mark chapters 15 and 16. Jesus takes women seriously. They are an integral and economically resourceful part of his entourage. They are the people who are entrusted to witness the resurrection. They are the people without whose witness there would have been good news and no church over which men could have considered themselves entitled.

It is always worth making the point that Jesus promotes women out of their disenfranchised position in Biblical times because it is far, far too early to take women's equality for granted. Out of hundreds of thousands of years of patriarchy, there have been just a couple of generations of female emancipation. And in the emerging world of the strong-man, from Trump to Putin to Erdogan of Turkey, what has been achieved

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by our mothers and grandmothers could all too easily
be lost by our daughters and granddaughters.

So whether she was a tart with a heart or one half of a
platonic apostlemance, I raise a glass to Mary
Magdalene.

Amen.