

Feast of Mary Magdalene 2019 Evening

(21.07.19)

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

One of my mentors, who has had a great influence on me, always encourages me to consider what makes a sermon *today's* sermon. He deplores the way burnt out preachers reach into their filing cabinets and read again the sermon they've been preaching on a particular passage for the last three or four decades. How can what was written perhaps 40 years ago be the sermon for today? Scripture may be full of eternal truths, but the sermon is what connects those eternal truths to the contemporary world. And we all know how quickly the world changes. The fear is that a sermon that can be trotted out year after year is full of nothing but trite platitudes.

My problem is – or at least one of the ones I'm prepared to talk about in public, is – that I preached on Mary Magdalene, on precisely the same passages

we've had this evening, just 12 months ago. The lectionary may be a three year cycle, but saints' days get the same readings year in, year out. And I've committed the cardinal sin of looking at that sermon again. I don't think I dare re-read it, not least because it's perhaps memorable for being the sermon when I deliberately used a swear word part way through it.

The sermon started with me quoting from a review of the film that had just been released about Mary Magdalene. The review, which had been published by Peter Bradshaw in the Guardian, had borne the subtitle "Toothless attempt to overturn Sunday School Myths." The criticism was that, in an attempt to show that there is no basis for Mary's reputation as the bad girl of the New Testament, what the film left us with was "a solemn, softly-spoken and slow-moving Christian piety" and an image of a Mary who does "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."

I'm going to run the risk of quoting my response to that: "I'm rather ambivalent 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 in - 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." And my conclusion to that part of the sermon was "part of me really wants to keep Mary Magdalene's reputation painted tart red."

But that, actually, won't do because there is nothing in the Bible to justify the popular myth that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. So it's our responsibility to bust that myth. There is a story in the Bible of someone pouring oil over Jesus' feet and then wiping them with her hair. It occurs three times, 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 – even though the Bible doesn't tell us so.

And this reputation is persistent. I wonder why the compilers of the lectionary – who ought to know better – pair this evening's New Testament 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 in need of redeeming, whereas in fact there is no evidence to support that.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

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, so, correspondingly, 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 that in a patriarchal church men simply 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 at 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.

My climactic peroration to last year's sermon was "It is always worth making the point that Jesus promoted 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 by our mothers and grandmothers could all too easily be lost by our daughters and granddaughters."

The sad thing is that that still is the sermon for today.

Amen.