

Mary Magdalen: St. James 22nd July 2018

- John 20. V16: Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).
- Today we are celebrating Mary Magdalene
- Mary is one of the most important and intriguing characters in the story of Jesus, and indeed one of the most controversial
- For centuries, she was identified with the unnamed 'woman of the city', in Luke ch 7 who was either an adulteress or prostitute in, who wept over Jesus' feet in anointed them with myrrh Jesus and also with Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus's feet on the eve of Palm Sunday. Since 1969 this belief has been abandoned
- But what Luke actually tells us in chapter 8 was that Mary was one of a group of women who had been healed by Jesus and who provided for him and his disciples out of their resources. This suggests that Mary was a woman of some wealth. Luke also tells us that Jesus had driven out seven demons from her, with suggests that she suffered from severe mental or spiritual illness
- But the really vital story of Mary Magdalene is told in today's gospel: how Mary was the first person to meet the Risen Lord on Easter Day and the first to proclaim the resurrection when she ran to the disciples and proclaimed 'I have seen the Lord'
- It is in Mary that we first see the deep sorrow of Good Friday turned into the joy and wonder of Easter, and the way in which she brought the good news to the Apostles earned her the title 'Apostle to the Apostles'
- There is lots of speculation about Mary and what happened to her afterwards: if you've read Dan Brown's the da Vinci code you'll know some of it
- If you want to read more, read Wikipedia
- There has also been a film about Mary Magdalen this year, but I haven't seen it, so I can't comment on it.
- What I want us to do is to concentrate on Mary's turning to the Lord
- In his oratorio 'The Apostles' Elgar portrays her as a penitent
- 'O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, the soul in anguish, the troubled spirit, crieth unto Thee. Hear and have mercy; for Thou art merciful: have pity upon me, because I have sinned before Thee. Hear the voice of the forlorn, and deliver me out of my fear. Help me, desolate woman, which have no helper but Thee: Hear and have pity. The troubled spirit, the soul in anguish, crieth unto Thee.'
- When people with deep problems encountered Jesus, they were not condemned, neither were they told, 'You're just fine as you are'
- Instead they were given the opportunity of new life with Jesus or to use St. Paul's phrase 'new life in Christ'
- 2 Corinthians 5.17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!
- In Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'Jesus Christ Superstar, Mary sings
'I've been changed, yes, really changed,
In these past few days when I've seen myself,
I seem like someone else.
- Mary's encounter with Jesus brings renewal: she turns from her bad old ways and finds salvation and new life
- But when she goes to the tomb on Easter Day, there is no hope or faith but there is still love and devotion
- And when Mary hears her name she turns to the Lord again and receives her new life back again.
- There was a vivid picture in the Children's Bible I used when I was a curate at Yardley Wood. Mary is in the dark clothing of mourning: the lower part of her body is still facing the tomb but the upper half has turned to the Risen Lord who has called her by name.

- So twice Mary turns to Jesus. This is replicated in the baptism, where older candidates, parents and godparents are asked, 'Do you turn to Christ, and they reply 'I turn to Christ'. This is also done in the renewal of baptism vows in the Easter Liturgy, when we say, 'I turn to Christ'
- Eucharist always begins with the invitation to confess our sins and receive forgiveness and new life in Christ
- The old absolution in BCP morning and evening prayer is very powerful, 'ALMIGHTY God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live;'
- So far we have thought about our individual turning to Christ, but God's call is to the whole of humanity to turn back to him
- One of my most vivid memories as an eleven year at Portsmouth Grammar School was singing a hymn called, 'Turn back O man, forswear they foolish ways'
- We sang it in the House assemblies: these took place in Minden House, with paint peeling from the walls and the smell of musty old camouflage netting.
- It wasn't helped by Mr. Dudell's piano playing: the best you could say is that it was good of him to have a go and it went to a dismal tramping tune. It began, 'Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways. Old now is earth, and none may count her days': it was a bit heavy for enthusiastic, energetic 11 year old boys
- But the context of the hymn was never explained to us.
- Written in 1916 in the middle of WW1, the year of the Somme, when people realised the full horror of the death and destruction
- It was written by Clifford Bax, the brother of Arnold Bax, well-known composer
- It portrays humanity, in a haunted sleep ignoring the voice of God and marching towards self-destruction and the need for humanity to turn around, to 'repent' and go the other way. The last verse is full of hope
- Earth shall be fair, and all her people one;
Nor till that hour shall God's whole will be done.
Now, even now, once more from earth to sky,
Peals forth in joy man's old, undaunted cry,
'Earth shall be fair, and all her folk be one!'
- After the war ended, 100 years ago this November 11, there was a strong resolve to go in another direction
- The League of Nations was founded on a belief that WW1 must never be repeated: that it must be the war to end wars. A lot of this hope was extinguished by the Wall Street Crash
- Tragically twenty-one years the world was in flames again: this time with over sixty million people being killed
- After WW2, United Nations, the beginning of the European Community, the Marshall Aid Plan, relief organisations Aid, such as Christian Aid, in this country the NHS and the Welfare State
- A renewed belief in Internationalism instead of Nationalism, peace instead of war, well-being instead of death and destruction. There was a powerful ideal of a better world, in spite of the Iron Curtain and the wars it spawned in Korea and Vietnam
- Yet tragically in the twenty-first century, the world seems to be marching in a nationalistic direction again
- 911 and subsequent terror, the economic crash of 2008, the refugee crisis caused by wars in Africa and the Middle East, has led people seem to be turning back towards nationalism: 'America First', Brexit and the rise of right wing parties in Europe, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and the rejection of Christianity or even its suppression in some countries.
- There are already trade wars and calls for more to be spent on armaments, and the danger that the real world issues of climate change and poverty will be neglected

- Patriotism is fine: I love our country and I'm proud of it. I love the Last Night of the proms and cheering England and Great Britain's teams. But nationalism, which exalts our country at the expense of others leads toward conflict and suffering as the twentieth century shows so clearly.
- Bax's words become very relevant again. We need to turn back and turn towards Christ. Even people without faith need to turn his ways, not in a naïve way, but with hope and wisdom. I long for the day when all people will say let's reduce the weapons of destruction, let's look after our planet, let's use wise science to improve the lives of all
- Take inspiration from Mary Magdalen and Mary, mother of Jesus: a more feminine approach to life: love, nurturing, gentleness, peace, with a gentler relationship with the planet and between its peoples
- We need the hope of Bax: 'Earth shall be fair and all her folk be one'
- We need the hope of Brian Wren in our gradual hymn
'As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends,
The love that made us, makes us one, and strangers now are friends.'