

Thursday 22 July is the Feast of St Mary Magdalene, the patronal feast of our Parish – where there will be Mass at 10.00am. Below is an article by Margaret Hebblethwaite (Margaret during lockdown became one of our ‘11.00am Sunday Mass in the Prayer Room on-line Parishioners’, and recently visited our parishes, prior to walking St Cuthbert’s Way from Melrose to Lindisfarne)

MARY OF MAGDALA, APOSTLE OF THE APOSTLES

In 2016, Pope Francis elevated the memorial of St Mary Magdalene, traditionally observed on 22 July, to the status of a feast day. A cloud of confusion is finally being lifted from the woman who gets up before sunrise to visit the tomb of the Jesus, while the men are sleeping.

Over the last 30 years, there has been a plethora of books restoring the reputation of Mary of Magdala from repentant prostitute to leading woman disciple. She is always mentioned first among the women followers, and her title as the “Apostle to the Apostles” is founded firmly on the commission given her by the risen Jesus. But though this is now familiar ground among theologians, it has not seeped through to the broad range of Christian believers.

After my article in the 27 March issue, some Tablet readers wrote to me to say they had always thought the woman who anointed Jesus was Mary of Magdala. You can see why. After all, almost every painting of the anointing is titled “Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus”. The pictures need to be renamed. John’s Gospel says Jesus was anointed by Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, but for centuries Rome insisted that the two women were one and the same. Now at last, the Vatican has admitted its mistake, and this February it took another step to clarify that the two women were distinct.

Paul VI had already begun to correct the record in 1969, with new directions for Mary of Magdala’s memorial on 22 July. She was no longer described as a “Penitent”. The collect no longer said that “her prayers moved thee to restore her brother Lazarus to life”, but rather that, “your Son first entrusted to Mary Magdalene the joyful news of his Resurrection”. And the Gospel was no longer Luke’s account of a sinner anointing the feet of Jesus but was changed to Mary’s encounter with the risen Jesus.

Then, on 3 June 2016, the status of the day was raised by Pope Francis from a memorial to a feast on the same level as those of “the rest of the Apostles” The Church has a hierarchy of celebrations from memorials to feasts to solemnities. A new Preface was published for it, saying that Jesus “honoured her with the office of being an Apostle to the Apostles”.

The correction was not made as a result of the modern books written by Lilia Sebastiani, Susan Haskins, Carla Ricci, Esther de Boer, Sandra Schneiders, Holly Hearon, Jane Schaberg, Deirdre Good, Ann Graham Brock and Michael Haag; it was based on the work of the Bollandists, a Jesuit-based association that has been working since the seventeenth century on the lives of the saints, and which prepared the way for the post-conciliar reform of the Roman



(Mary of Magdala, ca 1490, Piero di Cosimo, Palazzo Barberini, Rome)

calendar.

The 2016 decree pointed out just three “certain” facts about Mary of Magdala. She was “part of the group of Jesus’ disciples” (Luke 8:1-3, where she, Joanna, Susanna and many others went with Jesus through Galilee, together with the Twelve); “she accompanied him to the foot of the Cross” (in all the gospels); and she was the first Easter witness “in the garden where she met him at the tomb” (John 20; also Matthew 28:1,9). The decree acknowledged that, “especially since the time of Gregory the Great”, the old interpretation had dominated the tradition of the Western Church in its theology, art and liturgical texts. But “with good reason” Mary of Magdala had been called “Apostle to the Apostles” by Thomas Aquinas and Rabanus Maurus, for she “becomes

an evangelist” and “announces to the Apostles what in turn they will announce to the whole world”.

What the decree of 2 February 2021 added to that was to give Mary of Bethany her own day in the calendar, so her name and that of Lazarus were added to the memorial of their sister Martha on 29 July, exactly one week after the feast of Mary of Magdala. Now that the two women officially have separate days, it becomes still more difficult to claim they are the same person.

But why should it matter? Why should anyone be offended if two of the three greatest women of the gospels (the third also called Mary, of course) are rolled into one superwoman? It is because the conflated figure was no superwoman but was demeaned as the alleged sexual “sinner” of Luke 7, in the chapter before Mary of Magdala is mentioned as being freed by Jesus from seven demons. Curiously, in no other gospel text is demonic possession interpreted as sexual depravity rather than illness. When Jesus sets free a woman from the bondage of Satan in another Lucan miracle (13:10-17), no one dreams of saying she is saved from a life of prostitution.

There are no grounds for identifying Mary of Magdala with the so-called “sinner”.

The confusion between the two Marys was facilitated by thinking that “Magdalene” was her name. Once it is realised that “Mary the Magdalene” (never without the article in the gospels) means “Mary of Magdala”, just as “Jesus the Nazarene” means “Jesus of Nazareth”, it becomes rather difficult to think that the same woman was both of Bethany (near Jerusalem in Judaea) and of Magdala (a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee).

This is not to say that the attempt has not been made. The Anglican scholar John Wenham hypothesised in 1984 that the “attractive, adventurous” but “moody” Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha, had left home to go to the “delectable” town of Magdala, but her little adventure, “at first so exciting and enjoyable, all turned sour on her” as she turned to prostitution. I doubt anyone would dare write that today. The myth that Mary of Magdala was a repentant prostitute is not only insulting to Mary but insulting to prostitutes too. Who nowadays considers prostitutes to be lascivious women intent on leading men astray, to fleece them of their money and satisfy their own lustful desires? Do we not regard them as victims, whether of sex trafficking, pimps or poverty? The implication that they must repent is profoundly misogynistic.

If this old Mary Magdalene archetype seems exaggerated, listen to what Gregory the Great said, probably in 591, when he cemented the misidentification. “She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? ... It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts ... She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these

are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance.”

Let us leave aside that it was in fact Luke, rather than Mark, who said Mary had been freed of seven devils (which was then copied into the “longer ending” of Mark, not by the evangelist but by a different hand). By any account, Gregory’s text is profoundly shocking. But this was the dominant ideology, and it persisted to the point that a millennium later, in 1520, the French scholar Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples was condemned for heresy when he dared to suggest that Mary of Magdala and Mary of Bethany were separate people and that neither was Luke’s “sinner”.

The two Marys do, however, have some things in common – feet and tears – so it can be confusing. Mary, the sister of Martha, sits at Jesus’ feet and listens to him (Luke 10:39), and she anoints his feet with oil (John 12:3). Mary of Magdala and her companions take hold of the feet of the risen Jesus (Matthew 28:9). Mary of Bethany’s tears at the death of her brother move Jesus to weep with her (John 11:33). Mary of Magdala’s tears at the tomb prompt him to reveal himself to her (John 20:15). Also, in common is anointing oil, since Luke names Mary of Magdala as one of the women bringing spices and ointments to the tomb (Luke 23:56; 24:1,10). This is rather a relief for those of us who love religious art, for it means that we can keep the pictures that show her with her flask of anointing oil – her “logo”, says Eamon Duffy – so long as we remember that this shows her preparing to go to the tomb, not to Simon’s dinner party. And though she is traditionally shown unveiled, once considered a sign of being “forward”, it is the veils on the other gospel women that I would rather see removed.

When we strip away the false interpretations, we can be more receptive to one of the most beautiful stories in the gospels, as Mary of Magdala gets up before sunrise to visit the tomb, while the men are sleeping. She finds the stone moved and the tomb empty, and runs to give the alarm, thinking the body has been stolen. No meek and weak woman, this, but an initiator, a runner and a proclaimer. Desperate with grief that not only has she lost her beloved teacher but even the relic of his dead body, Mary of Magdala returns in tears, and it is to her that Jesus wishes to show himself first. He could have appeared first to Peter, but instead he gives her the responsibility of bearing the news – a heavy responsibility considering that the men are not going to believe her (Luke 24:11). It is not just an act of compassion on his part, but an act of confidence, entrusting her with the most important message that has ever been given. She carries out her mission with the courage of overwhelming joy, and all of us who have received the news subsequently can trace back to her the trail of proclamation.