

MARY MAGDALENE

In a couple of days there is a Saints day for Mary Magdalene.
Now we don't as a rule do very much for Saints days.

So as this Sunday's service is a wee bit different anyway, I thought I would do something a bit different, and think for a moment about Mary Magdalene.

Everyone knows there are loads of Margarets in our church.

There were loads of Marys in the Bible (in the New Testament at least).

When people had a common name then they were often identified by their geography.

Joseph of Arimathea.

Simon of Cyrene.

Jesus of Nazareth.

Mary of Bethany.

Mary of Magdala (Magdalene).

So Mary Magdalene was a woman called Mary that came from a place called Magdala - which was a wee town on the shores of Lake Galilee.

What else do we know about her? Not much.....

But it hasn't stopped people trying to fill in some details.

Here's what we can be sure about...

Mary Magdalene was far more important than we have given her credit for.

Always the first name in any list of women followers.

(Just as Peter is always named first in the men's list)

She is the only person identified in all gospels as being at the tomb.

She is the first witness to the resurrection - before any of the men.

She is the person who meets with Jesus first.

So she was a key figure.

To fill in the blanks about Mary Magdalene two very different things have happened to her.

One view tries to **bring her down**, and the other tries to **big her up**.

The more recent view is that second one - the one that tries to "big" Mary Magdalene up.

Basically, according to this view, Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married to each other. They had a sexual relationship. They were together - "an item".

Did Jesus have sexual feelings? Did he ever have a girlfriend?
 Could he have been married?
 Hard to imagine.

Just as it's hard to imagine Jesus supporting his local football team, or going fishing with his pals as a boy growing up. Its hard to imagine him being a normal person – because we've got an ideal image of him that makes him so different from the rest of us – he's not normal – he's 'more' than normal.

But there's the feeling among those who try to suggest the idea of Jesus being married or in a relationship, that this would put paid to the gospel.

Because if Jesus *was* in a relationship with her (or married to her) that would be wrong.... Right?

I don't see the logic in that unless you believe that to love someone is to be sinning, or that human love is not something good in itself.

An extension to this marriage/partnership idea suggests that Mary was pregnant when Jesus died on the cross, and ever since there has been a bloodline of descendents from Jesus himself.

Even today there are direct descendants of Jesus walking the earth...

Of course this stuff, (and the fact that Jesus and Mary had a secret baby) gave Dan Brown the idea for his book *The Da Vinci Code*.

And that's a good wee story in itself as long as you don't take it seriously. And its spoiled in part by the fact that Dan Brown keeps trying to justify the idea by making statements that the claims are historical and factual but which are complete and total balderdash.

For example, on the subject of evidence for Jesus being married to Mary Magdalene he makes two assertions.

First, he says that some Gospels (not the ones that are in the Bible) were discovered as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Now everybody knows that there were more than 4 Gospels written, but there weren't any gospels discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls.

What was discovered was ancient Jewish writings. Not only is there no Christian material, Jesus isn't mentioned anywhere...

And the second (and most outrageous) assertion is that Jesus and Mary's marriage is frequently reported in the other gospels that didn't make it into the Bible.

Not only is the marriage not frequently reported – it isn't ever reported in any historical writings.

When the gospels were written not one identifies Mary as being Jesus' wife. Instead of being '*Mary Magdalene*' she **could** have been '*Mary the wife of Jesus*' just as another rather special woman is called '*Mary, the mother of Jesus.*' When Mary meets Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane she calls him '*Teacher*'. Not husband. Not even Jesus. Just "*Teacher.*" When Susan meets me or calls over to me in a graveyard or shopping mall she doesn't call me '*Minister*'!!!!

I'll tell you my view (for what its worth).
If it turned out that Jesus *was* married to Mary Magdalene or anyone else, it wouldn't bother me in the slightest.
The idea that to be married means to be less than perfect seems to me to be total nonsense.

The reason that I don't believe Jesus was married is **not** because that would be wrong.
It's because there is not one scrap of evidence to suggest that he was.

The oldest big rumour about Mary is the one that seeks to discredit her.

According to this view Mary Magdalene is a prostitute – or, at least, **was** a prostitute.
Now the gospels suggest that Jesus was able to change people's lives around. Those regarded as sinners and disreputable, people like tax collectors and prostitutes were being transformed by the work, the healing and the teaching of Jesus.
Therefore it **could** be that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, but it's a bit like picking a woman's name at random out of the telephone directory and deciding that she is a prostitute.
There is no evidence for this.
There is nothing anywhere in the Bible or other historical accounts to back this up.

People have said what about that very forward (and fallen) woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and her hair?
That woman wasn't Mary Magdalene.

So if there is no evidence whatsoever for that, how did the idea come about?
The rumour was circulated by a Pope!

In a sermon in the 6th Century, Pope Gregory the Great announced that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.
This rumour just took hold of imagination.
The mud stuck.
And the Church's attention was placed instead on the Virgin Mary, and a more passive view of women.

So why did people in the church try to discredit Mary?

Because people in the church then and now have difficulties with some of the radical teachings of Jesus.

Men and women being equally important might be normal fare for us but it wasn't then.

Let's be honest, there are plenty of Jesus' sayings that still give us trouble.

"Sell all your possession and give to the poor."

"Forgive seventy times seven."

"Love your enemies."

"Neither male nor female – all are equal " – not radical words for us - but in Paul's day totally controversial.

The early church was born into a society where men ruled the roost. And while there were those Christians such as the much maligned Paul who saw the radical nature of male and female being one, there were those men who were threatened by that and so they tried to play it down.

They wanted to tone down the message of Jesus on women.

They were wrong then - just as those today who want to restrict the role of women in church are wrong now.

See Martha and Mary story.

This is yet another Mary!

These two were the sisters of Lazarus.

This text has often been seen as illustrating the debate between action and contemplation, between worship and serving, between spiritual and practical.

Buts its also about challenging gender roles and stereotypes.

By accepting and praising Mary, Jesus was encouraging her to take on a role that was normally reserved for the males.

She, as a woman, was being encouraged to listen, to learn, to think for herself.

So.....

What **can** we actually say about Mary Magdalene?

Mary was an important person in the gospels.

She is the first witness to the resurrection – before any of the men.

She is the first person to begin sharing that message with others.

So we can truly say that Christianity began with her!

Jesus' relationship with her proves he was willing to treat women as being important and able to learn for themselves and be key members of this new community.

Mary Magdalene reminds us that the gospel message is inclusive.
As the years have gone on the church has been guided by God to challenge our views on those we consider inferior, whether they are children, slaves, foreigners, the disabled, the poor, or homosexuals.
But it begins here with 50% of the human race – with women.

We don't know as much as we would like about Mary.
But we **do** know **this** – that she is there to remind us that message of the gospel is given for all,
that all people can be part of Gods family,
that all people can play a part in the work of the kingdom,
and that our churches need to be places and communities where all truly are welcome.

Readings – Luke 10:38-42
John 20:1-18

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