

Benedictus 19th July 2014

Mary Magdalene: Penitent Sinner or Apostle to the Apostles?

Who is this woman with the remarkable capacity to hold such different projections as penitent sinner (a euphemism for prostitute or fallen woman), apostle to the apostles, and more recently, feminist icon? What can we learn from her story that could help us on our own journey?

When we look at how Mary Magdalene has been depicted by artists and writers over the centuries, there is more than a hint of the romantic and erotic in these representations. And Mary Magdalene's 'I don't know how to love him', sung by Gemma before the service, from *Jesus Christ Superstar* is no exception.

So how has this portrayal of Mary Magdalene as penitent sinner come about? Apparently, in the 6th C. Pope Gregory the Great preached a homily claiming that the woman who washed Jesus' feet at Simon's house, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene, were all the same person. Gregory assumed that the seven demons represented the seven deadly sins, one of which was lust. By throwing herself at Jesus' feet she is showing full penance. This official version of Mary was only reversed in 1967!

Perhaps this conflation or confusion of the three women is understandable. The anonymous but sinful woman at Simon's house (Luke 7) was not the only one to anoint Jesus' feet and dry them with her hair. John's Gospel (12:3) describes how 'Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead, took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair'. Surely there is something erotic about a woman in that culture uncovering and unbinding her hair and using it for such a purpose. Remember too, though, that Mary of Bethany was the one who sat at Jesus' feet and Jesus commends her for doing 'the one thing needful' i.e. being a pupil or disciple, a role usually reserved for men.

Again, in Luke's gospel the story of the woman washing Jesus feet in Simon's house (ch.7) is followed in Ch 8 by reference to women who had been healed of evil spirits or infirmities and Mary Magdalene was specifically named as one from whom seven demons had gone out. She is also identified as one of a group of women of 'means' who provided for Jesus and the disciples in his itinerant preaching and teaching ministry

There seems to be some association in Luke's mind between these two women. Not that we today would equate demon-possession with prostitution – demon-possession seems to be more about mental health issues than moral deficiency. Admittedly though, in the NT and early Christian era, there was a closer link between sickness and sin. At any rate, both women would have been marginalised in that society, - they were both outsiders -and to be treated with acceptance and respect would have understandably evoked their gratitude and devotion.

If we look at the non-canonical gospels that came to light as part of the Nag Hammadi cache in 1945, a different picture of Mary Magdalene emerges. Although dismissed as Gnostic and heretical by some conservative scholars, Cynthia Bourgeault, Episcopalian priest, theologian and Centring Prayer teacher, claims that mainstream biblical scholars today do recognise the value of these additional primary sources dating from the New Testament era, for throwing new light on familiar gospel narratives. She herself has drawn on them in several books, including *The Wisdom Jesus* and *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*. Bourgeault claims that Mary Magdalene really seemed to get what Jesus was on about (which is more than we can say for the male disciples at times) and that would have contributed to her authority.

The gospels of Philip and Mary suggest that she played a leadership role in the early church, and not only among the women. They also suggest she had a particularly close relationship with Jesus, that she had received additional revelations from him and that this aroused Peter's envy and resentment.

But what do the gospels that we are familiar with, especially the Gospel of John, tell us about Mary Magdalene. All four gospels attest that Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus remained close during the crucifixion and subsequent burial. All except Luke assign Mary Magdalene a role in the resurrection narratives. Especially John who devotes a whole scene to her encounter with the risen Jesus as we have heard in tonight's reading.

At the beginning of this scene, Mary is alone. Peter and John, whom she had fetched earlier because the body was missing, apparently assume there is nothing to be gained by staying there and return home. Mary remains where she has last seen Jesus' body, greatly distressed. And this is where we take up the story.

When she looks into the tomb and sees the angels, they ask: 'Why are you weeping?' Why indeed? Where would you start if you had been Mary? The anguish of witnessing the slow, painful and shameful death of someone you loved so much that you were willing to risk personal safety and comfort to remain by him? The sense of abandonment by the one who had transformed your life, whom you loved and trusted beyond all others?

But she simply answers: 'They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him'. Perhaps the other losses were beyond naming: this one is at least concrete. At any rate, when she has said this, she turns around and sees Jesus standing, but she does not yet recognise him. As I read this I am struck me the phrase: 'she turned around'. She turned from gazing into the tomb to gaze out towards the garden. That seems like a significant if subtle shift – an opening up to other possibilities. I am reminded of some wonderful lines from Emily Dickinson:

Not knowing when the dawn may come
I open every door.

Maybe Mary isn't ready to fling open every door, but she is beginning to look somewhere else than the last place she had seen him. As she looks out into the garden instead of into the tomb, she sees someone standing there whom she thinks is the gardener. How long has he been there, waiting for her to turn? When he, like the angels, asks, 'Why are you weeping?' she repeats what she said to them: 'They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him.' It is only when he calls her by name that she recognises him.

Why didn't she recognise Jesus? For that matter why didn't the disciples on the way to Emmaus recognise him? Cynthia Bourgeault suggests that in Mary's case it is because she is so blinded by lover's grief and so fixated on the missing body.

When she does rush to embrace him, calling him 'Rabboni, Teacher', Jesus rather startlingly, says: 'Do not hold on to me. But go tell my brothers that I am ascending to my father and your father.' At least it is 'your' father, not 'their' father. She is included.

For me this 'do not hold on to me' reverberates far beyond the immediate context and also addresses us. There are echoes of it in the OT reading that is used on the Feast of Mary Magdalene: The Song of Songs, Ch 3. You may have recognised that we used some of this in our opening prayers:

I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but found him not.
I called to him but he did not answer;
I found him but did not let him go.

It is into this space of normal human expectation that we hear Jesus say, 'No, do not hold onto me. I have something important for you to do. Go tell my brothers...'

Whatever their relationship had been before, it is now different. Mary is urged to move from Eros to Agape. She needs to learn to love him in a different way. To move beyond her own personal agenda, her own soap opera, as Richard Rohr urges us to do, to find her place in the larger story.

This vignette has much to tell us about the spiritual life with its rhythms of absence and presence. Joan Chittister, Benedictine nun and well-known author and speaker, says: 'Prayer is not an analgesic designed to protect us from life'. Indeed it is my experience that prayer can enable us to be really present to our life experiences, especially the challenging ones. Sometimes (maybe often) we do not experience the consolation of presence (remember Mother Theresa and how her posthumously published diaries revealed that she not only ministered in a context of external poverty, but from a sense of inner poverty as well). Less mature souls (all of us at times) might be tempted to give up. But writers in the mystical tradition remind us that the experience of absence, the place of unmet yearning, is a sign of presence. In this vein, Chittister encourages us to remember:

Whenever I feel lost, I am being brought to remember God knows exactly where I am. When I feel abandoned, I am challenged to remember that God is

energy, not solace. When I demand proof of Spirit, I am being taught, like Mary Magdalene, not to cling but to take that presence to others'. (J. Chittister *The Breath of the Soul*, p.94)

I find myself needing to add a proviso here. The encounter between Mary and Jesus, at least as reported in John 20, takes only minutes, even allowing for the probability that we have only a brief summary of what took place. For most of us the process takes far longer – it may take months or years of divine holding (this does not of course preclude human holding) to move through some experiences. to fulfil our calling not to cling, but to convey the divine presence to others.

Mary teaches us the importance of showing up, keeping faith, and opening ourselves to the possibility of divine presence and mission. Shortly we shall be moving to the space in the service where we meditate. It seems to me that meditation using a mantra allows us to show up, without clinging to any images or expectations of ourselves or of God.

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