

Almighty God, whose Son restored Mary Magdalene to health of mind and body and called her to be the first witness to his resurrection: forgive our sins and heal us by your grace, that we may serve you in the power of his risen life. Amen.

If you have watched the ABC religious programme 'Compass' in the last two weeks, you would have seen an interesting two-part programme on the female disciples of Jesus and how prominent women were in the ministry of Jesus and how they effectively were sidelined by male leaders of the Church over the subsequent centuries. One of the women that was particularly focused on in the first programme was the Saint we celebrate today, Mary Magdalene.

In my sermon last week I suggested that the daughter of Herod was the victim of bad press over the centuries. To use a popular modern expression, she was the victim of "Fake News". I would suggest however that Mary Magdalene has been the recipient of the longest and most decisive character assassination in the history of the Church. She has come down through history as the scarlet woman, the penitent prostitute, the alluring siren who tempted our Lord with her feminine wiles, but who somehow, by the grace of God, overcame all these things to become a witness to the resurrection of Christ.

If we look to the only contemporary source which can cast any light on Mary's life, we look of course to the four gospels. Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name eleven times in the four canonical gospels, more than most of the apostles. 'Magdalene' most likely means that Mary either came from the town of Magdala, a fishing town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, or as the Compass programme suggested, her name could be a nickname. Much like Simon was called 'Peter' the rock, and James and John were called the 'Sons of Thunder', so it has been suggested that 'Magdalene' is related to the Aramaic word for 'tower', suggesting that Mary was an important and influential figure in the Jesus movement.

The Gospel of Luke lists Mary as one of the women who travelled with Jesus and helped support his ministry "out of their resources", indicating that she was probably a woman of means. The same passage also states that seven demons had been driven out of her, but Luke does not elaborate on what they were. In all four canonical gospels, she is a witness to the crucifixion of Jesus and, in the Synoptic Gospels, she is also present at his burial. All four gospels identify her, either alone or as a member of a larger group of women, as the first witness to the empty tomb, and the first to testify to Jesus's resurrection. Mary Magdalene is in fact the only person that all four gospels agree on as being present at both the crucifixion and resurrection. As the first one sent with the good news of the resurrection, she is known in many Christian traditions as the "apostle to the apostles". Interestingly, Mary is never mentioned in the New Testament outside the four gospels.

Mary was however a central figure in later Christian writings. These texts, which scholars do not regard as containing accurate historical information, portray her as Jesus' closest disciple and the only one who truly understood his teachings. In these writings, Mary Magdalene's closeness to Jesus results in tension with the other disciples, particularly Peter.

The notion of Mary Magdalene being a former prostitute comes from a sermon of Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century, in which he not only identified Mary Magdalene with the anonymous sinner who anointed Jesus in Luke's gospel, but also with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But also, for the first time, Gregory explicitly identified Mary Magdalene's sins as ones of a sexual nature. "It is clear, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts... She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance." In subsequent religious legend, Mary's story also became confused with that of Saint Mary of Egypt, a repentant prostitute who lived as a hermit. With that, Mary's image was sealed for nearly fourteen hundred years. An example of that image is seen on the cover of our Pew Bulletin this morning.

Inspired by Pope Gregory, writers throughout the Middle Ages developed elaborate fictional biographies of Mary Magdalene's life. The most famous of these accounts comes from *The Golden Legend*, a collection of stories about the saints compiled in the thirteenth century. In it, Mary Magdalene is fabulously rich, insanely beautiful, and outrageously sensual, but she gives up her life of wealth and sin to become a devoted follower of Jesus. And the idea of Mary as a former prostitute has persisted in popular culture, even to our own day. The two best-known examples are in the 1955 novel and 1988 film, 'The Last Temptation of Christ' and in Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's 1971 rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

There has been, however, a strong push to bring back the real Mary Magdalene within the life of the Church in recent decades. The identification of Mary Magdalene with other New Testament figures was omitted in the 1969 revision of the Roman Catholic Calendar and very few scholars today would conflate Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the repentant woman from Luke's gospel as being the one person. Also, a new film, released earlier this year about Mary Magdalene portrays her as Jesus' closest disciple and the only one who truly understands his teachings.

In searching for the 'real' Mary Magdalene, we find the primary witness to the fundamental truths of the Christian proclamation. The places where she and the other women are mentioned throughout the gospels strongly indicate that they were vital to Jesus's ministry and the fact that Mary Magdalene always appears first, whenever she is listed in the Synoptic Gospels as a member of a group of women, indicates that she was seen as a very important person in the Jesus movement.

So today, we not only celebrate a towering figure of the early Christian church, but we also celebrate that there is no longer any need to see Mary Magdalene as the demon-possessed and fallen female who needs saving by the male saviour Jesus. Rather, we celebrate Mary Magdalene as a strong woman of faith, who supported Jesus in his ministry, who was an active disciple of Jesus, and who was the "Apostle to the Apostles", and who today inspires all those who witness to the hope of resurrection and new life that we are given in Jesus Christ our Lord.