

2021 0722 S Mary Magdalene (Havant)

Today, the Church honours Mary of Magdala in Galilee, Mary Magdalene, acknowledged as “the apostle to the apostles”.

She is one of the people Jesus healed early in his ministry and who as a result became one of Jesus’ constant companions.

We do not know what she was healed of, but St Luke tells us that Jesus had driven 7 demons out of her. In the olden days to say that someone was possessed by demons meant that they were dominated by forces hostile to God leading to all sorts of illnesses, misfortunes and sins. In the Bible the number "7" is a specially symbolic number implying fulness or totality (- you might remember Jesus telling his disciples that they have to forgive those whose have offended them "seventy times seven times"; that doesn't mean 490 times, but "infinity squared times 10" - in other words "without end")

So whatever it was she had been healed of was pretty serious, and her troubles had probably been so great that other people had avoided her. In fact, once she started going around with Jesus, people quite likely started muttering about him too - in the gospels we often find critics complaining about the sort of company Jesus kept.

Mary Magdalene was the first person to whom the risen Jesus appeared, that is to say she was the first witness to the resurrection. She was also we might say, the first evangelist: it was she who first told Peter and John that the tomb was empty, and later that she had seen the Lord, hence “the apostle to the apostles.” It is right that in the Church’s calendar today’s celebration is on a par with the feasts of the Apostles.

This woman from the province rather disparagingly nicknamed “Galilee of the Gentiles”, a person who may have been in the past any one or all of very sick, very wicked or stark staring mad was privileged to been the first bearer of the good news that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Not perhaps the first person we would have chosen as our primary witness had you or I been Jesus! After all, just imagine the reaction - oh that funny old Mary of Magdala, she's going off again!

The first thing for us to learn then from about St Mary Magdalene is that there is no limit to what God can do or whom he can choose. In other words however awful we are or however dreadful the circumstances of our lives we can be transformed and be disciples of Jesus - indeed not only disciples of Jesus, but his witnesses. It should be a great encouragement to us that so many of the members of the early church had not been very respectable. It should be an encouragement but also a challenge. We must never hide behind the fact that we are not good enough. Of course we are not good enough (we've all got skeletons in our cupboards, what will people think of us?) But it is not for us to choose what God will do through us if we will let him

But how to let him? The key is love and longing. Mary's own discipleship was rooted in her gratitude for healing. We too need to understand that God has set us free and be more grateful for it. This is essential for us both as disciples, followers of Jesus, and as witnesses to him. It is that same gratitude and longing that kept Mary faithful at the empty tomb, weeping, longing for the impossible. And it was to this love and longing that Jesus revealed himself. There is so much we don't understand about life and its mysteries that can only be revealed by God himself. Watching and waiting in faithful loving hope is essential to learn what God next wants us to know. But even then, there will still be more.

In the Mary Magdalene chapel in Chichester Cathedral is the striking Graham Sutherland painting of Jesus the gardener telling Mary not to cling to him. *Noli me tangere: Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.*

The love that made Mary a disciple, the love that held her at the foot of the Cross, the love that took her to the tomb of Jesus, and even when she found it empty, kept her there until Jesus revealed himself and made her his witness, that same love now made her want to hang on to him - rather like Peter wanting to build permanent lodgings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration. But God always has more to give and show if we persist in our loving and longing.