

ADVENT SERMON SERIES: 21'12'14 'Women in the Bible: Mary Magdalen',  
(Michael Fluck, Reader, St. Faith's)

*May I speak in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †*

Part 1:

In our series of Advent sermons about women in the Bible, Bishop John talked about Ruth, and last week Sandra considered Mary the mother of Jesus. Today, I shall look at another Mary, Mary Magdalene.

To set the *scene*, I want to begin by considering someone who's been in the news this year - a modest 17-year old Pakistani girl, Malala Yousafzai, a devout Muslim, who recently became the youngest person to be awarded the Nobel Prize.

Malala grew up in the remote Swat Valley at a time when Taliban militants started imposing their fundamentalist version of Islam – in which TV and music are forbidden, women are banned even from going shopping unless accompanied by a male relative, and *girls* are banned from receiving any *education* (the Taliban blew up over 100 girls' schools). They claim they're doing this in God's name.

Supported by her father (a teacher), Malala began writing a regular internet blog about life in the valley for the BBC's Urdu language service. In this, she courageously argued for the *right of everyone*, male or female, to receive an *education*. Her reports soon began to attract support throughout Pakistan and around the world. This so enraged the Taliban that gunmen boarded her school bus and shot her in the head – she was 14.

She survived (but only just), and was sent to hospital in England for extensive rehabilitation. The assassination attempt triggered a huge outpouring of support, both for Malala and for her cause, and she continues to speak out bravely; and she was even invited to address the United Nations.

Part 2:

The Taliban's message for *women* is simple:

*"Know your place. That place is at home, under your father's, and later your husband's authority. Your role is to look after your husband and to bear him children. Full stop."*

That's not too far removed from the position of women in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day:

-Women's identity and their role in life were effectively defined in terms of their *reproductive* function and their duty to the *men* in their families – they effectively *belonged* to their fathers, and later to their husbands.

-Husbands could easily divorce their wives, but women could only get a divorce with difficulty.

-Any *suspicion of adultery* by a *woman* was likely to have fatal consequences – being publically stoned to death.

-In cities, women rarely left the house. In the countryside, they worked outside, but rarely alone.

-No man would consider speaking to a woman he did not know.

-Unlike boys, girls weren't sent to school, nor did they attend the teaching part of synagogue services.

-Women weren't allowed to teach, or even to say the blessing at meals.

### Part 3:

The attitude of JESUS to women stands in stark *contrast* to all of this. In fact it would have seemed *outrageous*. We need to appreciate that.

In the culture of the time, it really is *extraordinary* that, as the gospels tell us, Jesus travelled through towns and countryside, preaching, healing, and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God, accompanied, not only by the twelve *men* he had chosen to be his disciples, but also by a number of *women* who weren't even related to them. Think about it.

Jewish people would have found this *shocking*.

Although it was not unknown for a well-to-do woman to *support* a rabbi with funds or resources, to leave her home and *travel* with a rabbi was *unheard of*.

Luke tells us that the women who accompanied Jesus had been *cured* by him (of infirmities or evil spirits). And among them were some *well-to-do* women from respectable sections of the community – one was even the wife of King Herod Antipas' own steward.

We're told that they '*provided for Jesus and the disciples out of their resources*'. In other words, these *women* made it *possible* for them to buy food and pay for accommodation, rather than always being a burden on communities and individuals they visited. That's important because it meant that Jesus' opponents couldn't dismiss him and his followers as a bunch of parasites sponging off honest folk.

### Part 4:

Prominent among the women in Jesus' group, was Mary Magdalen - her name implies that she came from the Greek-speaking fishing village of Magdala on Lake Galilee. We don't know much more about her background - *except* that Luke tells us that Jesus had *cured* her of, not just one, but *seven* 'demons'.

The idea of demonic possession was used to account for various conditions which *we* would normally explain in scientific terms. Luke doesn't tell us *what Mary's symptoms* had been - was her problem a neurological condition like *epilepsy*, a psychiatric disorder like *schizophrenia*, or something else affecting her *behaviour*? We don't know; but his use of the number *seven* indicates that Mary and her family must have suffered terribly before Jesus healed her (possibly they even threw her out).

For centuries, the Western church (unlike the Eastern orthodox churches) identified Mary Magdalen with the woman of ill-repute in the previous chapter of Luke, who anoints Jesus' feet with ointment at Simon the Pharisee's house - and so Mary was considered to have been a repentant prostitute. But it's now acknowledged that there's absolutely no evidence for this.

One thing *does* seem clear about Mary Magdalen, however: although she isn't *often* referred to by *name*, all four gospels imply that she played a *leading role* among the people who accompanied Jesus during his ministry, and who were witnesses to his crucifixion and to his resurrection, because whenever the women *are* named *Mary Magdalen* is nearly always mentioned *first*.

What's more, when most of Jesus' male disciples have fled in fear, it's Mary Magdalen (along with his mother, one or two other women, and his beloved disciple John) who finds the *courage*

and the *devotion* to look on while he is crucified, to keep company with him at the foot of the cross while he hangs there slowly dying in agony, and to hear him gasp his last words. They must have found it *unbearable*.

Jesus is buried hurriedly since it's late and the Sabbath begins at nightfall - bodies can't be buried on the Sabbath nor can they remain unburied.

Mary Magdalen and another woman stay and watch while the entrance of his tomb is sealed with a huge stone and a guard is set by the authorities (to prevent anyone removing his body). There's been no time for the women to observe the customary decencies by anointing his body with spices, which must have *added* to their distress.

So, at first light on the morning *after* the Sabbath, Mary Magdalen, with one or two other women from the group, hurries to Jesus' tomb with spices that she has prepared to ensure that he has a decent burial.

The four gospels differ slightly in their account of what happens next, but they all say that the women find the stone rolled back and the tomb empty. Then they encounter either one or two young men in dazzling white who tell them that Jesus is *risen*, just as he said he would.

In three of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John), Jesus *himself* then appears to Mary Magdalen, and tells *her* to go and break the news to Peter and the disciples that he is risen.

Characteristically, the men's reaction is to dismiss the news as women's nonsense, until Peter charges off to see for the empty tomb for himself.

Afterwards, as we know of course, Jesus himself comes among them - and even *eats* with them to prove that he's real. And later, as the book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us, the *women*, along with the male disciples, receive the gift of the *Holy Spirit*, as promised by Jesus.

#### Part 5:

A few years back, a leading member of a church I was associated with remarked that he didn't like *change*. That made me *wince* inwardly because, as followers of Christ we need to recognise that the Christian faith is *all about change* and the possibility of change – both in our own lives and in the world. That's what the kingdom of God is about.

The gospels tell us that Jesus 'went through towns and villages proclaiming and bringing the good news of *the kingdom of God*'. But the kingdom of God is *not* only *preached* by Jesus, it is actually *embodied* in the band of people travelling with him. Luke's *mention* of those *women* would have struck his Greek and Roman readers with as much force as their actual *presence* would have struck the Jews among whom Jesus travelled, preached, and healed. (How the presence of those women would have set tongues wagging!).

What's more, the *well-being* of these women after being *healed*, is visible *evidence* of the *power* of God's kingdom as *embodied* in Jesus; and Jesus' power over evil and chaos is *especially* evident in Mary Magdalen.

That travelling group recruited by Jesus can be seen as a *reflection* of God's kingdom, in which there is *reconciliation* between men and women, married and single, healthy and ailing, well-to-do and not so well-off.

In the week when the C of E has just appointed its first woman bishop, it's worth reflecting on the fact that:

- Despite the culture of the time, Mary Magdalen and a group of other *women* not only *accompanied* Jesus and the disciples during his travels, they made his ministry *possible* by providing support.

- On top of this, Mary Magdalen and a small number of *women* were the first people to whom Jesus chose to *reveal* the truth of his resurrection – that's not *insignificant* since it might have been expected that Jesus would have chosen *Peter*, his 'rock' and the *leader* of his disciples, or even John, his beloved disciple to whom he entrusts the care of his mother.

Jesus' whole *ministry* was about *challenging* people's complacency, vested interests, and established ways of thinking - and about getting us to view ourselves, other people, and God through *new eyes*, so that we recognise that *everyone* (yes everyone) is equally important in God's eyes.

Inspired by Mary Magdalen, may we have the courage to meet God's challenge and step outside our comfort zone in living out our faith.

Amen †