

Fr Colin Lawlor: Homily preached at St Faith's Havant for the Havant and Waterlooville Walsingham Cell, Eastertide 2021

In our gospel reading today we encounter Mary Magdalen, the first witness to the resurrection of our Lord, and I want to say a few words about her this morning, not least because I have something of a soft spot for Mary Magdalen, perhaps because the first church of which I was vicar was dedicated to her, but also because, I think, there is something very 'real' and 'human' about her and the way in which she is portrayed in the gospels.

And yet she is also one of the most misunderstood of the first disciples of Christ – indeed much of what we think we know of her is not really born out from what we read in scripture.

She is often thought of as having been a great sinner, and is even associated with the woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears, a woman who has historically often been regarded as a prostitute – but nowhere are these assertions made in the gospels.

The misunderstanding appears to derive from a series of Easter sermons given by Pope Gregory 1st in 591, in which he conflates Mary Magdalen with Mary of Bethany (the sister of Lazarus and Martha) and with the *unnamed* 'sinful woman' who we encounter in Luke 7:36-50, who washes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. This seems to have resulted in a widespread belief that this 'sinful woman' must have been a prostitute.

Notwithstanding the passage we heard in our Gospel reading today from the longer ending to Mark's Gospel (which may have derived in part from Luke) and which declares that Mary was a woman from whom Jesus had cast out 7 demons, but what that exactly means is open to speculation.

All we can say with any degree of certainty is that she probably hailed from a place called Magdala, which was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, hence her name, and that she was a close disciple of Jesus.

That she was brave, going back to the garden tomb after Jesus' burial at a time when it was probably incredibly dangerous to do so.

And that she was the first witness to the resurrection.

The way in which this encounter is recorded by the author of John's Gospel is one of the most moving passages in scripture, and is generally read at the Eucharist on Easter Day. She encounters Jesus in the garden but mistakes him as the gardener, either because she fails to recognise him through her tears, or perhaps because she isn't looking directly at him. The recognition came when he called her by name and the sound of his voice called her from despair to hope and from hope to belief.

And she immediately goes and tells the disciples, for which she is known as the apostle to the apostles.

There is a sense in which Mary Magdalen has 'touched' my life in many ways during my own Christian pilgrimage – not least as vicar of St Mary Magdalen's church in the Parish of Moulsecomb, north of Brighton.

And then, in a very different way, as Chaplain to the University of Brighton, when I led an annual student pilgrimage to Taize, that great ecumenical community in Burgundy which, in normal times, attracts thousands of young people from all over the world in the summer months.

On route to Taize we would often stop of at a small town called Vezeley, where there is a stunning basilica, which is a UNESCO world heritage site. The town probably owes its existence to the basilica, and the basilica owes its existence to its association with Mary Magdalen. Because in that vast and open basilica, stunning in its simplicity, there is a crypt in which there is very ornate reliquary, which itself the very reason that the basilica was built in the first place. For tradition has it that this reliquary contains the mortal remains of Mary Magdalen.

Now whether or not these are the bones of Mary depends to some extent whether one believes the witness of a 13th century text which is a compilation of medieval stories of the saints, and which is generally known as *The Golden Legend*. Here, Mary Magdalen is again conflated with Mary of Bethany (the sister of Martha and Lazarus). She is said to be both sensual and sinful, but she renounces everything to follow Christ.

Fourteen years after the crucifixion, according to this text, Mary, Martha and Lazarus (along with two other Christians) are thrown by their enemies into the Mediterranean Sea in a rudderless boat. But rather than perish they are washed ashore at Marseille in the South of France. The legend goes on in some detail, but eventually it suggests that Mary spent the last 30 years of her life as a hermit in a desert cave in Provence.

And that, it seems, is where the association with Vezelay comes from.

Does it matter whether the reliquary in Vezelay really contains the remains of Mary Magdalen?

Well, in one sense, not really. What matters is that the walls of that Basilica are steeped in the prayers of thousands upon thousands of pilgrims who have travelled there and worshipped there. And there is a real sense in which one feels the sanctity of that church as you enter to pray as many thousands have before you over the centuries.

This is a sacred space.

And, at any event, it has given me the opportunity to say something about ‘pilgrimage’, at this time when we had hoped to be in Walsingham, England’s Nazareth – and perhaps something about what we have lost during this pandemic and perhaps what we have learnt and what we have gained.

The writer, theologian and Anglican priest, Patrick Woodhouse in his book *Life in the Psalms* argues that there is a sense in which religion has much to do with geography.

The mystery of God, he suggests, has been revealed in places, and their very stones hold echoes of these moments of divine revelation.

Pilgrimage, then, is a journey to a sacred space, whether the sanctity of that place derives from a divine revelation (like that to the Lady Richeldis at Walsingham in 1061),

Or because of its association with a famous saint and martyr (like the Shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury),

And even if the exact historical foundation of the place of Pilgrimage is steeped in legend (like Vezelay or even Santiago de Compostela).

These places are all *sacred spaces* and they are made such by the faithful prayers of pilgrims over the centuries, and because of this their very stones echo moments of divine revelation.

Perhaps one thing we have lost during this pandemic is the opportunity to be pilgrims, to visit these sacred spaces and pray and worship there.

But I would also suggest that this absence has perhaps given us a greater sense of the importance of being able to come together in sacred space as community in sacramental worship – as we do today.

In a recent podcast the former Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, described pilgrimage as ‘a journey beyond the boundaries of our familiar world’ to a sacred place.

It is, he suggests, like journeying up a mountain top and witnessing to the immensity of God’. But, he asks, what happens when we get home? Do we remain on the mountain top, or do we find ourselves in the depths of despair in a dark valley? Does the experience of pilgrimage sustain us for a short time, but then wear off?

I hope that what we learn from our encounters of pilgrimage will have in some sense permeated our lives and that even in Pandemic this has helped to sustain us – even when our own sacred spaces, our churches, have been closed.

For me, I find that all of the places of pilgrimage that I have been blessed to visit have permeated my life in different ways, and, reflecting back have helped me through this difficult period, even during the most dark and difficult days.

The Holy Land has led to a more intimate understanding of the biblical narrative as one reflects on visits to places of divine revelation that we find in scripture, or as one walks where Christ walked and see what he saw.

Taize, with its beautifully simple liturgy, and incredible moments of communal silence. Imagine the profound power of up to 5000 young people being silent, and I mean really silent, for a sustained period of time. Silence has become absolutely central to my own life of prayer and contemplation.

Walsingham, with its catholic sacramental tradition, which has been central to my belief and practice since childhood.

And hopefully each one of us can reflect upon ways in which our experience of pilgrimage continues to permeate our day to day living, that sustains us in our Christian pilgrimage, even in pandemic.

Perhaps for you it might be the regular rhythm of prayer. It might be an appreciation of silence, or of sacramental and communal worship, or it might be an understanding of the importance of sacred space.

Or something else.

At any event there is much truth in that oft quoted adage:

‘Tourists pass through places, pilgrims let places pass through them.’

And hopefully next year, God willing, at Walsingham, we might be able to proclaim our Easter cry of joy and victory in that wonderful sacred space.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen
He is Risen indeed. Alleluia

Amen.