

HOME RETREAT SATURDAY 24 JULY 2021

ST MARY MAGDALENE APOSTLE TO THE APOSTLES

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you. Lord our God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good morning and welcome to this home retreat.

The title of this talk is St Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles. It has seemed an appropriate subject as it was her feast day last Thursday and my purpose is to celebrate and reflect on this title of hers, Apostle to the Apostles.

Firstly, though, just to say something in brief summary about the gospel references to Mary Magdalene, which give us what we know of her. Her name suggests that she came from Magdala in Galilee, just west of the Sea of Galilee. Her first meeting with Jesus is not narrated in the gospels, though we hear twice (in Luke 8:2 and in Mark 16:9) that Jesus had freed her from demonic possession, the passages mention seven demons, which in biblical terms suggests a full complement. In the medieval Latin church she became identified with the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee and with Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She is not however clearly so identified as Mary Magdalene in these places and it is the places where she is so identified that are needed to explore the title, found in a number of traditional Christian writers, St Anselm of Canterbury and St Thomas Aquinas among them, and now formally acknowledged in the liturgy of the Catholic Church of 'Apostle to the Apostles'.

Mary Magdalene is named among the women in the vicinity of the cross of Jesus at the crucifixion on Calvary and among those who visit his tomb early on the day of the resurrection. These references come in all four gospels, which is a powerful testimony. She is usually named first, as Peter is always named first in the list of Apostles. This already alerts us to the importance of her role. It is true that neither Mary Magdalene, nor any of the other women are named or referenced in the earliest written list of witnesses to the resurrection from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 15, dating from some twenty years after the events. However, Paul's interest is in proving the Resurrection as if in a legal document rather than providing a narrative, and it is often pointed out in this connection that for this time the witness of women would not be legally accepted.

Still we have the four gospels, written later than St Paul but it would seem based on earlier oral tradition. And here, as I have said, all the gospels agree that the

women were first at the empty tomb and that Mary Magdalene had a special and preeminent role among them. It is what happens at the tomb and what is said there that leads to Mary's title 'Apostle to the Apostles'. In Mark 16:6 Mary and the other women are told by the young man in dazzling white that Jesus has been raised from the dead and he then says 'Go and tell his disciples and Peter'. In Matthew's version the charge is given by Jesus himself, who meets the women just after they have seen the angel and who says to them 'Go and tell my brothers'. This is in Matthew 28:10. Most dramatically and compellingly is the version in the gospel of John, where the concentration is exclusively on Mary Magdalene, who sees the Lord and is charged by him to go to the Apostles. The key verse is John 20:18, which stresses the carrying out of the command: 'So Mary of Magdala came to the disciples to give them the message "I have seen the Lord".' This is the gospel that comes down the centuries and to us.

This passage from John, understandably I think, is the gospel for her feast day so I would like to quote the whole passage and to make a couple of comments on it:

John 20:11-18

But Mary was standing outside at the tomb weeping. Then, as she wept, she bent down to look into the tomb, and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head, the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him'. As she said this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not realise that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbuni!' – which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and sisters, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'. So Mary of Magdala came to the disciples to give them the message, 'I have seen the Lord', and that he had said these things to her.

In order to be Apostle to the Apostles, this passage makes clear that Mary has first to be a witness. She has to be a witness to the fact that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb, which causes for her an explosion of grief, but then that Jesus has risen from the dead. As in St Matthew's account this witness comes from meeting Jesus

himself, though famously in John, she does not recognize him at first. When she does her sorrow turns to joy. This turning of sorrow, sorrow turning to joy seems to be symbolized in the passage by two mentions of Mary turning: she turns first from the tomb towards Jesus, supposing him to be the gardener. But she seems to be only half looking at him, because when he calls her by her name 'Mary', we are told that she turns again. This turning, this change from sorrow to joy, is necessary if Mary is to be a witness and to be Apostle to the Apostles. For her, as for us in our lives, there has to be more than one turning.

But between these two turnings, as Mary is still being brought to the full realization of her witness and the commissioning of her mission, she thinks that Jesus is the gardener. St Augustine famously says that Mary was in fact right that Jesus was the gardener. He is thinking no doubt of those parables in which God, for example, scatters the seed on the land or is the vinedresser. But there is a deeper and older reference too. In Genesis 2:8 at the beginning of the story of creation we are told that God planted a garden in Eden. So here now on this eighth day of creation, God is again at work in the garden of the resurrection, restoring it, restoring life, holding out the promise of a new life. In 2016 fulfilling the wish of Pope Francis, Archbishop Arthur Roche, then Secretary now Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship in the Vatican, raised the celebration of St Mary Magdalene from a memorial to a feast. He made this point among others:

She has the honour to be the first witness of the Lord's resurrection ... the first who saw the empty tomb and the first to hear the truth about his resurrection. Christ showed special consideration and mercy to this woman who showed her love for Christ by seeking him in her anguish and suffering in the garden ... In this way it is possible to highlight the contrast between the woman present in the garden of paradise [*Eve*] and the woman present in the garden of the resurrection [*Mary Magdalene*]. The first spread death where there was life; the second announced life from a sepulchre, the place of death. As Gregory the Great underlines: ... "Indeed because a woman offered death to a man in Paradise, a woman announces life to the men from the tomb".

Archbishop Roche makes a second point and I would like to draw to a conclusion by considering this. It concerns the words of Jesus to Mary 'do not cling to me' and 'I have not yet ascended'. He writes:

The Lord says ... "Do not cling to me". This is an invitation to enter into an experience of faith that goes beyond materialistic assumptions and the

human grasping after the divine Mystery which is not simply addressed to Mary but to the entire Church. This is an ecclesial moment! This is an important lesson for every disciple of Jesus Christ to neither seek human securities nor the vainglory of this world, but in faith to seek the living and risen Christ!

I would comment on this that Mary has not yet reached the end of her journey, nor the Church the end of its, with the witness of the resurrection of Jesus. It still has a mission and an evangelization to perform. We still await the consummation of this mission, of the consummation of all things, when we shall at last be securely with the risen Lord in the new garden of the resurrection. So the collect for her feast concludes by praying that we come to see the living Christ reigning in the glory of the Father. As Mary saw him in the garden of the resurrection, so may we, with her come to see him in the garden, in the paradise, of heaven. I will end with the full text of this prayer:

Collect for the feast of St Mary Magdalene

O God, whose Only Begotten Son entrusted Mary Magdalene before all others with announcing the great joy of the Resurrection, grant, we pray, that through her intercession and example we may proclaim the living Christ and come to see him reigning in your glory. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen