

Sunday 22nd July 2018
Mary Magdalene

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Song of Solomon 3.1-4

NT: 2 Corinthians 5.14-17

G: John 20.1-2, 11-18

How many of you have read *The Da Vinci Code*, or perhaps seen the film. It's a great film (I haven't read the book) with action and mystery and detectives, and Tom Hanks running about the place looking terribly worried about something or other. If you don't know the story and don't want to know anything about the ending, then please put your fingers in your ears now! It's all about Mary Magdalene, whose feast we keep today, and it's about families.

We are invited by scripture and tradition to think all sorts of things about Mary Magdalene. Was she a prostitute – there's no reason to think she was, but tradition called her such for many centuries. Had she suffered from demons – Luke's Gospel explicitly names her, saying that Jesus cured her of evil spirits. There are two things we can perhaps say definitely about her: she was a witness to the death and also the resurrection of Jesus; and she was part of Jesus' inner-circle. We hear in the Gospels that she was there at the Cross. And Mark's Gospel describes their relationship: she was part of a group of women who "used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee". In other words, Mary Magdalene was part of Jesus' family. She wasn't a blood relative, but she was someone who shared her life with him and cared for him. That's what *The Da Vinci Code* really seems to be saying: it is saying that Jesus was more than a bland and inhuman leader who had disciples trailing behind him like slaves behind a master. Instead we explore the theme that Jesus was indeed truly human – just as we declare in the Creed – and that he loved and interacted with his disciples, including Mary Magdalene, just as we all need family (in whatever sense we wish to use the word family). I want to use today's sermon to reflect on that a bit more, with the help of some other people.

When we think of families we perhaps have some fixed ideas, and sometimes difficult ideas. Listen to this description of love for a child, written by an Israeli poet called Abraham Sutzkever (b.1913). It

sounds like a shocking image, but actually I have heard many people speak like this about their children.

*Was it from some hunger
or from greater love –
but your mother is a witness to this:
I wanted to swallow you, my child,
when I felt your tiny body losing its heat
in my fingers
as though I were pressing a warm glass of tea,
feeling its passage to cold.*

It sounds like cannibalism, but actually it's an inability to find the words to express the closeness that we can feel to the people we love most. And perhaps the Parent/Child relationship is a good place to start, because the very great majority of us have experience of it, either as a parent or a child. But that relationship also brings the pain of separation at some point, though again there is a lesson that we don't always experience it in the way that society expects. Listen to this description of a boy learning of the death of his father. It's by an English poet called Edward Lucie-Smith (b.1933).

*"Your father's gone," my bald headmaster said.
His shiny dome and brown tobacco jar
Splintered at once in tears. It wasn't grief.
I cried for knowledge which was bitterer
Than any grief. For there and then I knew
That grief has uses - that a father dead
Could bind the bully's fist a week or two;
And then I cried for shame, then for relief.*

Here the poet is rather wrapped up in the concerns of his own life. He knows he is meant to cry because his father has just died, but he can only think of the effect on others if he does so. Rather movingly, the grief comes anyway. He goes on to say.

*I was a month past ten when I learnt this:
I still remember how the noise was stilled
in school-assembly when my grief came in.
Some goldfish in a bowl quietly sculled
Around their shining prison on its shelf.*

*They were indifferent. All the other eyes
Were turned towards me. Somewhere in myself
Pride, like a goldfish, flashed a sudden fin.*

And that pain reminds me of Mary Magdalene. We don't always have the words written in the Bible, and so there is no long description of her grief and what their relationship was like, but we heard in today's reading that she goes to the graveside and she weeps. She goes quietly when no one else is around. She is torn apart by the grief of separation.

All of which is in some ways very comfortable. Not comfortable in the sense that grief and pain is welcome, but it is in the expected order of things. The reality is more complicated, as the poem about the boy whose father had died shows: he clearly understood how he was expected to react and behave, but in fact he wasn't quite ready to feel it. Mary Magdalene was in a similarly complicated position: despite *The Da Vinci Code*, there really is nothing to suggest that Jesus and Mary ever got married, but her behaviour in today's Gospel very much reminds us of the grief we might have when a husband or wife dies. The other complication about life with those to whom we are closest is that it isn't a simple progression of love and then grief. There are all the other things to throw in: frustration, anger, laughter, pride... We do get some of this in the Gospels: Peter is always getting it a bit wrong. How can you go and eat in a tax collector's house, he asks. Or when Jesus explains why he must wash Peter's feet, Peter quickly says 'and the rest of me' as he unbuttons his shirt, and Jesus patiently explains what this is all about. Or, if we think about Mary Magdalene, some traditions have associated her with the Mary of the story about Mary and Martha: the two sisters have very different ways of dealing with Jesus, and Martha is very frustrated by her sister who is sitting at Jesus' feet whilst Martha is left to do all the work in the kitchen. 'It's not fair', she says – echoing the familiar cry of brothers and sisters since the world began.

One of the things I find most refreshing about the Bible is that there is not always much gloss on the picture, and the relationships we see in the Bible are gritty and human. The airbrushed picture of family

life has never satisfied me, and in the New Testament we see all the usual family emotions. Do you remember when the mother of James and John asked if they could sit either side of Jesus in heaven? We then hear that the other ten disciples were “angry” with the brothers (Matthew 20.24). Or later on in the Bible, when Paul was making his way around the Mediterranean, he got into various disputes.

Listen to this from the Acts of the Apostles (15.36-40):

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’ Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.

So even the best of people get into a scrape every now and then!

There are many things we could say about Mary Magdalene. When I was looking for what other people had written about her, I found quantities of poems which used rather poetic language to describe her gazing at Jesus’ tomb, but none of them really captured the flavour of someone who, along with a close group of men and women, had been accompanying Jesus in his ministry. These were people who had shared their lives together, and despite the occasional frustrations, they were family to each other. This is also our calling as a Church – as the Church of God more broadly, and also more locally here at St Nick’s. We are family for each other in the sense that a Church community travels together, as the disciples did, and so we also hear the pain each of us suffers, and perhaps sometimes we inflict that pain. And there is anger and love and compassion and frustration and all the emotions which we see in the disciples. The disciples had Christ in their midst in a very real sense, but of course he is also in our midst, present in the sacraments we celebrate as a Church, but also present in those very human relationships which we have with each other.

Fr Crispin Pailing