

THE FEAST OF ST MARY MAGDALENE

Song of Solomon 3. 1-4

2 Corinthians 5. 14-17

John 20. 1-2, 11-18

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

‘Woman, why are you crying?’ As she appears in the twentieth chapter of St John’s gospel, St Mary Magdalene is more than just a character. She is the chosen example. Each of us can recognise something of ourselves in her. She represents the Church, and she represents humanity. More than that, Mary Magdalene is the symbol of humanity renewed by the grace of the Risen One. On this Easter morning that is described in John 20, there is a scent of new creation.

St John, who is usually so careful to situate the events of the life of our Lord according to Jewish days or according to the chronology of the previous days, starts his twentieth chapter anew. He writes, ‘...On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.’ As Mary arrives at the tomb, and as her visit to the tomb is recounted by John, suddenly we realise that there are many clues in this text that take us back to Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Not only does Mary visit the tomb on the first day of the week; the angels are there; Mary Magdalene is twice called ‘Woman’; and Mary thinks that the man who is standing next to her is the gardener.

Yes, this scene at the tomb takes us right back to the first day of creation;¹ to the presence of the cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden;² to the creation of Eve and to her being given the name of ‘woman’;³ and to Adam, who was placed in the

¹ Cf. Gen 1. 5.

² Cf. Gen 3. 24.

³ Cf. Gen 2. 22, 23.

garden of Eden to cultivate it and care for it; and who in so doing was a figure of Jesus, the gardener of our souls.

In this scene at the tomb, Christ is portrayed as the New Adam, the one who restores humanity to its original condition. And in this scene, Mary Magdalene is that exact opposite of Eve, who was deceived by the words of the evil one and who had no confidence in the Word of God. Mary, on the contrary, was delivered from seven demons;⁴ and she was purified of her sins by the mercy of our Lord, who saw her sincere repentance and love as she brought an alabaster jar of ointment to the Pharisee's house where he was eating and broke it so that she could bathe his feet with the ointment and her tears.⁵ During that dinner and looking at Mary, Jesus said to Simon, 'Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; ...she has shown great love'. Mary not only repented of her sins; she recognised and seized hold of the love of Christ; and as she was converted, she was introduced into the beauty of grace and renewal.

If you have ever been to Florence and have visited the San Marco convent, you will remember that many of the walls of the convent and some of the cells of the Dominican friars are decorated with paintings by blessed Fra Angelico, the famous Italian Renaissance painter. In one of the cells, Fra Angelico painted his version of the scene at the tomb that we have described for us in John's gospel. The painting, which is called *Do not hold on to me* or *Nolo me tangere*, shows our Lord standing in a virginal and fenced-in garden. One sees the entrance to the empty tomb on the left-hand side of the painting; and in the garden are many beautiful flowers. There is the scent of spring and of new life. With Jesus, a new life started for Mary Magdalene; and with him, a new life begins for us as well, whatever we may have done. Christ can make us new. He can make us like a reborn person.

⁴ Cf. Lk 8. 2.

⁵ Cf. Lk 7. 36-49.

But there is more to be said about Mary Magdalene. Our first reading, taken from the Song of Solomon, points directly to our gospel reading. In the Old Testament reading, Mary is also portrayed as the beloved one who is looking for her beloved. In previous chapters of the Song of Solomon, there are references to the nard (or ointment) with which Mary bathed the feet of our Lord;⁶ there are references to the disappearance of Mary's loved one;⁷ there are references to her asking, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'; and there are even references to Mary finding Jesus again.⁸ We read, 'I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go.'

Now, however, Christ does not want to be held any longer. He says to Mary, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.' And he instructs her, 'Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God".' As she recognises her *Rabbouni* but is not allowed to hold him, Mary understands that she has to renounce finding Jesus by touching him or by seeing him.⁹ She must now learn to apprehend him in faith and love; and she will find him in the mission of proclaiming the Good News. In pursuing this mission, Mary will find the one whom her heart loves. She is willing to do great things for God, and she wants others to know and love Christ as she does.

Mary's question, 'Have you seen him whom my heart loves?' is not only an expression of a personal search. It is an invitation to all who are far from our Lord to seek him and to find him; and to be found by the one who alone can satisfy the human heart.

⁶ Cf. Song 4. 13, 14.

⁷ Cf. Song 5. 6.

⁸ Cf. Song 3. 1-4.

⁹ In a sense, it can be said that there were three conversions in the life of Mary Magdalene: from sin to grace, from death to life, and from this world to the world that is to come.

As the first witness of Jesus who was risen from the dead, Mary Magdalene is an example of what Christ wants to do for every one of us. Mary is the masterpiece of grace, and a sign of hope given to those who are struggling with sin, despair or the wiles of the evil one. Our Lord loves each one of us; and Jesus asks us to love him with all the love in our heart. Whatever evil we have done in the past, today Christ only sees the love we have for him now, in our humble, contrite and confident hearts.

After reporting the resurrection of our Lord to the disciples, and after praying with the apostles in anticipation of the coming of the Holy Spirit,¹⁰ we are not given further information in the Scriptures about the footsteps of Mary Magdalene. According to a very ancient tradition, Mary came from the Holy Land to France, in Provence, to preach the Gospel to all; and afterwards she retired for penance and prayer in a cave on a rocky mountain, la Sainte-Baume, where she is known to be the patroness of penitents, preachers and mystics.

Today, all over the world, the story of Mary Magdalene still touches the hearts of humanity, of people who are looking to put their trust and confidence in Jesus; of people who are looking to God for acceptance, in the place of rejection; of people who are hoping to find grace and mercy, in the place of judgement and condemnation. Mary is an example of faith in Christ, and she is an example of someone who unhesitatingly shows her love for Christ.

Today, may we seek to imitate her; and let us ask our Lord to make all things new in our lives, as he did for Mary.

Amen.

¹⁰ Cf. Acts 1. 14.