

A Message from Godfrey

It is very unlikely that scholars will ever agree about the precise nature of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. However, she does feature quite prominently in the story of the latter days of Jesus' days on earth. It is clear from the fact that she was present at the foot of the cross during the crucifixion and her venturing into the garden long before dawn that Mary loved Jesus more than herself.

Mary had come to grieve, to be near to the body of her beloved friend. Somehow, in the past week things had gone terribly wrong and now Jesus was dead and lying in the tomb. This should not have happened as a week ago it all seemed to be going so swimmingly well with Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which had seemed so exciting and so full of promise.

The previous evening, Jesus' lifeless body had been taken down from the cross and given to Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple, who had decided to give his own newly hewn tomb to Jesus. Here he is joined by Nicodemus, the sceptical Pharisee, who had several encounters with Jesus and had watched and listened to him, and we can only surmise that he had slowly made the transition from scepticism to faith. Now, by his actions, his new found allegiance to Jesus was now public and out in the open.

Mary was up early. Perhaps an anguished night had meant that she had not been able to sleep. Her first thoughts were that the enemies of Jesus, and they were many, had taken the body of Jesus and under cover of darkness had dumped it in the open grave of the common criminals like those who had hung on the cross beside him. It would have been most unusual for a Roman governor to release the body of someone executed for treason, so to assume that fanatics would have defied Pilate's ruling was quite reasonable.

The sight of the empty tomb must have been quite a shock to Mary. She immediately rushes off to inform Peter and another disciple, presumably John the “disciple whom Jesus loved” and they go off to see for themselves. After all, what man was going to take the word of a mere woman in things so startling and bewildering even though it is one who had been amongst the inner circle of followers!

Simon Peter, who had a lot to ground to regain after the last few days of Jesus’ earthly life, making up in new found boldness what he lacked in physical fitness lurched past his fellow disciple into the tomb. Peter saw the discarded grave clothes and must have wondered what on earth was going on.

John, however, was bolstered by Peter’s reaction and entered the tomb. As today’s gospel reminds us, what he saw caused him to believe, but we are not told what it was he actually believed. But on that Sunday they stumbled home, probably more confused than when they had probably been awoken by Mary Magdalene earlier that morning.

As Mary had said, the body was missing, but it does not appear to be a straightforward robbery. Disquieted and with their heads buzzing full of improbable and disturbing thoughts, they return home. Mary does not leave. Where would she go? What would she do in her state of confusion and unknowing? There is nowhere for her but to remain close by even if Jesus’ body has gone. Mary can have no idea that the love that compelled her to stay in the garden will, in a moment cause her to be the witness of the risen Christ. In a moment Jesus’ has turned her life upside down once again.

Mary was a woman who had lost her way in life and had found calm and purpose when she followed Jesus. Mary was a forgiven sinner and, on that first Easter Sunday, was demoralized and in distress and whose evidence had every likelihood of being dismissed in the male dominated culture of the day. But not even the male dominated culture of that time, and sadly today, can dispute the fact that love is so strong that it can survive death, as Jesus love for us witnesses.

The sixteenth century artist, Titian, painted a picture of the scene which can be found in the National Gallery. It shows Mary reaching out to touch Jesus in the garden as she finally realises that the man standing before is the Risen Christ. The title of the painting, *Noli me Tangere*, comes from the Gospels, referring to when Christ did not want his followers to cling to his physical presence. The scene which Titian has chosen to depict is right there in the garden.

During the Second World War, this painting was amongst London's favourite paintings. For a month in 1942 it was, by public demand, the only painting on public display in the National Gallery when thousands of precious paintings had been removed to the safety of Welsh slate mines for safe keeping. Ben Street, in the magazine, *Art 21*, wrote:

"So for the first months of 1942—Noli me Tangere was the only painting in the National Gallery. For Londoners under constant threat of extinction from above, this small High Renaissance painting, produced as a display of virtuosity and ingenuity by a young artist on the make in the aristocratic circles of early 16th century Venice, contained an idea of transcendence that collapsed historical time and lived again at that moment. It might be worth reminding ourselves, especially now, that's what art is supposed to do." It might be worth reminding ourselves, especially now, that is what the Jesus story of the Resurrection is all about.

It was cherished because, as the bombs fell, Londoner's found reassurance in this story that love is so strong that it can survive even death, the strong possibility that they faced from the Blitz. It was the same sentiment that was expressed recently in the face of another threat to London, terrorism.

John's testimony is that Jesus is not dead. He is Risen. The historical fact of the resurrection is the foundation stone of the Christian faith. Years later, the Apostle Paul declares the same truth:

"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

We are here today to testify to that same truth that love is so strong that it can survive even death.

Thoughts and prayers,

Godfrey

