

Mary Magdalene 2018 (Trinity 8)

In the increasingly surreal world which we seem to inhabit on so many fronts, including the political world (and a friend of mine wondered if Guy Fawkes had a point!), the febrile state of so many aspects of life seem to me to feed division on so many fronts. Added to this we have the cry (from all sides) of FAKE NEWS. Now in some cases this may well be the case, but very often we ourselves just need to stand back and try to evaluate what is going on by using our own eyes, ears and brains, rather than seeing it through the spectrum of other people's opinions or prejudices. This is sometimes difficult.

Let's apply this to Mary Magdalene, whose feast day we celebrate today. I can't think of any woman who has suffered more greatly from FAKE NEWS than Mary of Magdala. Two thousand years of misidentification and misinformation about someone who was at the heart of the group of disciples of Jesus Christ. The Church has a great deal to answer for in this regard, and it says something that it has taken nearly two thousand years for the Western Church to seek to rehabilitate her memory. We only have to look at the Magdalene laundries of the Irish Church and State, Tim Rice's *'I don't know how to love him,'* (much as I love the tune) to the preposterous *'Da Vinci Code'* by Dan Brown to see that even today her memory is still clouded by misrepresentation and association. In fact, it was only two years ago that the Roman Catholic Church raised her commemoration to a proper Feast Day at the instigation of Pope Francis. Better late than never.

But let's look at the Gospel facts surrounding her life. She is mentioned in Luke Chapter 8 as one of a group of women who travelled with Jesus and the disciples. She is described as one 'from whom seven demons had gone out.' What does this mean? Unlike the traditional interpretation of sexual immorality applied to her, it is much more likely that she had suffered from some problems of the mind. Seven in Biblical terms speaks of completeness, so it may be that she suffered from a form of debilitating mental depression until meeting Jesus transformed her life. However, this is only my interpretation! Luke also says that she and other of the women who travelled with Jesus and the Apostles provided for them. In other words, these women had independent means. The town of Magdala on the shore of the Sea of Galilee was a Gentile town with a small Jewish presence. When it was recently excavated, one of the earliest and largest synagogues was uncovered, dating back to the time of Christ. Perhaps Mary contributed towards its cost. Again, speculation on my part!

Her memory was conflated in the early Church with the unnamed woman in Luke 7 who anointed the Lord's feet with her tears and precious ointment, and then further with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anoints Jesus with precious perfume in John's Gospel. Add to this some identification and the way in which the Church, which began with an understanding of equality unparalleled in the society of the time, moving to accommodate Roman societal mores until we reach Pope Gregory the Great, who was able to preach a series of sermons about a woman of loose morals and dark nature, whose chief example was that of the sinfulness of women and the repentance which could be achieved as even Mary Magdalene had shown. The baggage surrounding his take on Mary lasted nearly fourteen hundred years. No wonder she is often depicted gazing at a skull.

Fortunately, the Orthodox Churches never took this approach. Since the earliest times, she has been known as one of the Holy Myrrh-Bearers and Equal of the Apostles.

It might seem strange therefore that our Old Testament reading is from the Song of Solomon – a book of erotic poetry which somehow made it into the Bible. However, both Judaism and Christianity have used this extraordinary work as an opportunity using its imagery to explore faith. For us, Christ is the Beloved, the Bridegroom. The passage today is about deep longing for the beloved who is being sought. It talks of love, but this loss can be equated with what we can imagine Mary feeling as she stood at the foot of the cross and saw the person who had transformed her life die in agony. Grief at its rawest.

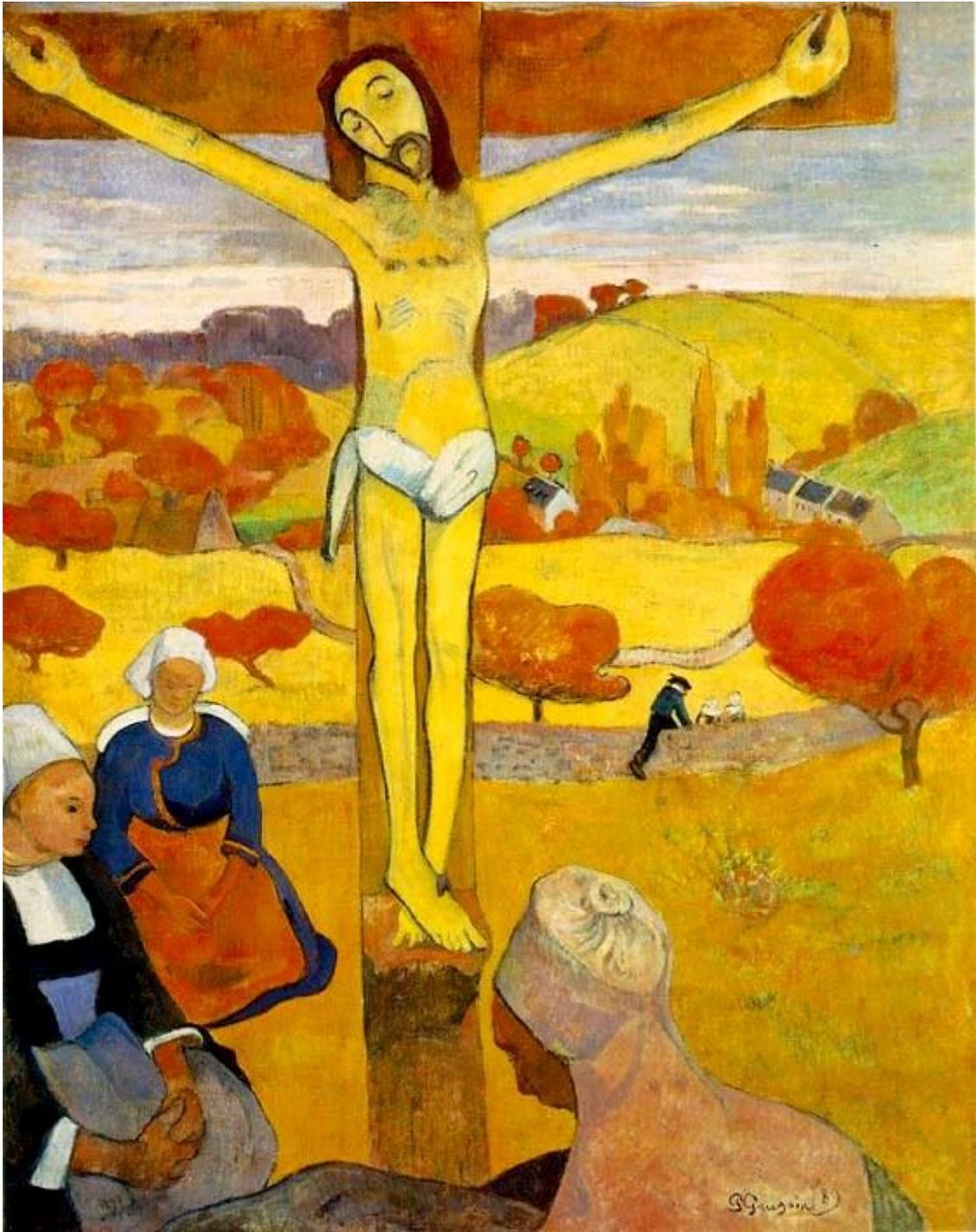
This leads us to the radiant account of Easter morning from John's Gospel. Have you ever noticed that it mirrors the Creation story at the start of Genesis? We should have in our minds the opening of the Gospel: 'In the beginning – in the beginning was the Word. This identification of Jesus with God. Then in today's Gospel reading, it is the first day of the week, It is dark. This darkness lasts through the opening of the chapter until the light of Resurrection floods the scene, and it is Mary who is the first to be drawn into the radiance of Resurrection Life – the Resurrection Life to which we are all called to be signs. Mary become the first person to say the great Easter message, The Lord is risen; the first to bear the fulness of the Gospel message to others; the first to recognise that through Christ, we are all a new creation. In the words of Paul, *'everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'* This new creation is the mystery of Divine Love at the heart of our faith, our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, and Mary was the first to proclaim it.

When the Vatican produced its document regarding the upgrading of this Feast, it ended by saying what a great example Mary Magdalene was to women. She is more than this. Mary is a great example to all of us - women **and** men – all drawn by her example to proclaim Resurrection Life in all that we do – no Fake News, but the utter reality of Life, lived at its fullest – the Good News of Jesus Christ. Love trumps division and hatred.

Mary Magdalene's example also teaches us that we sometimes must abandon preconceptions and old ideas, to let go of fear and despair, and forget the idea that nothing changes; that we must never allow ourselves to be swept along by the fake values of so many aspects of modern life. Mary saw the Lord, and everything in the world changed . . . and through us continues to change.

We are called to help bring about this new creation through our **own** transformation in the knowledge of the Love of Jesus Christ for humanity, and the Life-Giving power of the Holy Spirit at work in all we do. This is who we are. This is our call.

So, we give thanks for Mary Magdalene – Apostle to the Apostles, the one who says to each of us, 'The Lord is risen – Alleluia.' – He is risen indeed. Alleluia!



The Yellow Crucifixion – the Marys at the foot of the Cross. Paul Gauguin – 1899

Song of Solomon 3:1-4

3 Upon my bed at night

I sought him whom my soul loves;

I sought him, but found him not;

I called him, but he gave no answer.

² 'I will rise now and go about the city,

in the streets and in the squares;

I will seek him whom my soul loves.'

I sought him, but found him not.

³ The sentinels found me,

as they went about in the city.

'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'

⁴ Scarcely had I passed them,
when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go
until I brought him into my mother's house,
and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

2 Corinthians 5:14-17

¹⁴ For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;^[a] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,^[b] we know him no longer in that way.

¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

John 20: 1-2, 11-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.'

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^[b] 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.