

## **Mary Magdalene 2017**

Today is a special day in the annual life of our parish. It is the feast day of our patron saint, St Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is a saint for all people, one whom everyone can relate to and take inspiration from.

Because it is such a special day, it is one of the four or five times in the Christian year when we have incense. Incense is an important symbol of Christian devotion and worship. Incense has been an integral part of worship long before the institution of the Church. It is widely referred to throughout scripture to denote special moments of divine closeness.

Throughout scripture, whenever God or heaven is near, we hear of an accompanying sweet smelling smoke or mist. It brings mystery, awe and wonder. Incense in our worship today helps open our spiritual eye to the reality before us; heaven breaking into this world.

In recent decades, our church communities have somewhat devalued the power of symbolism, but they have done so at their peril. Words can simply never explain the full glory and wonder of our God of compassion and mercy. The God who loves us so dearly that he sends his Son so that we might attain eternal life. We worship in a building of rich symbolism; its Saxon architecture, the wonderful art in its stained glass windows, its inspiring crucifix, its medieval reredos, the robes worn by our priests and servers are all symbols that can move us to a better spiritual place if we have our hearts open to receive what God wishes to reveal to us through them. Symbols engage different parts of our senses and reveal to us eternal truths that our intellect alone can never comprehend.

Earlier this week, I took the opportunity to visit a friend who is a priest in a dense urban area on the edge of a city. The church he had charge of

had recently been condemned and had subsequently been demolished. The site of his church was now a flattened rubble surrounded by a tall metal fence. The only surviving remnant of the church was the 12ft crucifix which had once adorned the garden and a medieval font turned on its side in the mud.

The church community had been forced to search for another suitable venue to worship in whilst they tried to raise the £20 million it would cost to build a new church. They began meeting in the local pub, but that became unsustainable, and so now they were meeting in a hall.

The parish priest was unsurprisingly rather downbeat when we met. As I joined them for their daily Eucharist, I began reflecting on what I had seen. At coffee I found that God had given me something that I needed to share with them all. As I spoke to them, I realised that the picture before me was a marked example of the spiritual battle that is being waged all over our world and within the hearts of every one of us. The powers of darkness had attacked this once beautiful symbol of God's love and all that remained was rubble. But a symbol of love remained, all the same, and evil had not overcome it. The crucifix stood as a testimony that Christ had not left the estate. The font turned on its side was not a testimony of defeat but a promise of a future where the waters of God's freedom would once again flow. The church still lived and God's people still met, albeit in a less permanent home. This scene, then, was not a scene of death and decay, but was to be a wonderful symbol of resurrection. Amidst the worst the world could do to derail God's plan, evil would not conquer, because God would always have the final victory: God's people survive and eventually a new church will become a symbol of resurrection to the surrounding community once again.

Our church is just such a symbol in our own community and how wonderful it is that it should be dedicated to the first witness to Christ's rising from the dead. Today we celebrate the feast day of our patron saint, the Mary called Magdalene. We first encounter Mary as a woman who is a living example of the way the powers of darkness can limit and distort a human life. Mary Magdalene is a sinner, a woman living in darkness and caught in a cycle of behaviour that she cannot seem to escape. Thought to be a prostitute, she has been left behind by the economic imbalance of the world. She is forced to live in the shadows and earn a crust in any way she can. But this lifestyle had left her emotionally and mentally damaged. Her life was limited and dying due to the ravages of sin and darkness which encircled her from all sides. All sides except one...

Something in her encounter with Jesus brings hope and light into her otherwise dark world. She becomes the sinner who is forgiven and encounters a new way of living. For the first time in her life, Jesus offers her a world where her past does not dominate her future. A new world unfolds before her eyes. Here is a man whose unconditional love transforms everything she is. Meeting Jesus brings small moments of resurrection, where she begins to live in the light, long before Jesus actually dies. Mary Magdalene becomes Jesus' most loyal supporter and her love for her Lord transforms her whole world and every relationship she has.

Mary Magdalene is probably the most changed of all the Disciples. After meeting Jesus, her spiritual sight becomes pure and unaffected by the distractions of the world. Her heart becomes so filled with the love of God that it is no wonder that she is the first one to see the Resurrection.

She lives in the light of the Resurrection for the rest of her life. She is given such a confidence and positivity for God's master plan that she travels to far off shores spreading the Gospel and growing the Church. Mary Magdalene's influence in spreading Christianity around the world cannot be underestimated.

For Mary Magdalene, the grand event of Jesus resurrection following his death is a significant event revealing the full glory of God's kingdom values breaking into this world. Transformed by it, she enters a lifetime of service to God. But the story for Mary Magdalene starts long before this divine event. With every act of love, every moment of forgiveness, every time she is told that she is worth more than what her life had previously been reduced to; Mary experiences fleeting glimpses of God's kingdom values breaking into this world. That's where her journey begins.

As individuals and as a community we have moments of resurrection in our lives too. Those times where a reconciliation, an act of love, a coming together in the joint endeavour of service to God. During these times we see the kingdom of God breaking into our world. Today, our special festival, may well be one such moment.

And we are a community living in the Resurrection. This church community has been transformed these past few years from a place of defensiveness, fear and darkness to a place of vibrancy and joy. So as we go about our business today, and every day, let us live in the joy that only faith in Jesus can bring. Let us not allow the negative forces of doubt or cynicism take a hold of our souls.

Just like Mary Magdalene, the more we can live in resurrection joy, the more resilient we will become to the dark forces of the world. The more we strive to live in these moments, the more we live in tune with the kingdom values of God. The more we live in tune with the Kingdom Values of God, the more we become conduits for the incoming kingdom that transforms our world and opens eternity.

Amen.