Sermon for the Parish Eucharist by Extension on the Feast of Mary Magdalene, 22nd July 2018
*2 Corinthians 5:14-17, John 20:1-2,11-18*

**Confronting the Miracle**

The story of Mary Magdalene might be the most important passage in the Bible.

Mary Magdalene found the tomb empty. What did it mean?

*... she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). 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." ' 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.*

How to deal with it mentally, in our thought - is it open to reasonable doubt?

Reasoning against other logical possibilities, that, e.g.

- Joseph of Arimathea took his body and reburied it; why? What good would it do to Joseph, or anyone he sympathised with?

- Jesus wasn't dead when they put him in the tomb;

- The Jews or the Christians took his body; what Mary M initially thought must have happened. Someone would have 'snitched' or leaked.

- It was a 'conjuring trick with bones'. The late David Jenkins, formerly Bishop of Durham, said it was **not** a ...

Rational answers are available to contradict all these theories.

But do we believe? Memo 1 Cor 15:12f. If Jesus wasn't raised from the dead, our faith is in vain: we are proclaiming a lie.

But what does it mean, to believe in something? To believe that x is true, x is real - but what does that mean? That x is something, or does something? That if I believe that x, x is necessarily true? Not necessarily.

If I believe that something is true, then for me it is true; but someone else might review the exact same proposition that I have said must be an example of God at work, and get the same moral imperatives without a Christian sanction. Do this, because God says it is good, or, if God is not in the picture, because it benefits the most people or makes for the greatest human happiness (if you are a Utilitarian, say).

What if we somehow 'duck' the issue and simply carry on? How? I think this is a way of describing what Richard Dawkins thinks. He doesn't worry about a beginning or an end of creation, but rather sees a process, evolution, which is all we need to know about, from a practical point of view. There is no Creator, no divine force.

Can there be a sort of 'tribal' Christianity? Maybe the earliest example of this would be the army of the Emperor Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 325AD [CE]. Constantine, inspired by a dream, ordered that his soldiers should paint on their shields the symbol of the Cross. They then won a victory. Did they believe? Surely not. But Constantine went on to make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. It's arguable that that was as important in making Christianity a worldwide religion as St Paul's work among the so-called 'Gentiles', the 'nations', in a Jewish Bible context, the non-Jews.

If either St Paul's realisation that the Gospel ought to be preached to the Gentiles, or the Emperor Constantine's decision to adopt Christianity as his empire's official religion, had not happened, we might well not be here in church.

But what about today? People talk about having 'Christian values', without their being churchgoers. That's interesting. The way that St Paul thought it worked, as he put it in his letter to the Galatians (chapter 5), and effectively as everyone from John the Baptist onward preached, if you came to believe in the Good News of Christ, you would be changed: you would 'repent'. And you would start to live a virtuous life.

But what if you skip the believing bit, and just decide to live a virtuous life, because it makes sense to you?

We've then got at least two schools of lukewarm moralists. C of E Christians, on the one hand, say, and the 'spiritual - I mean charitable - but not religious' on the other.

But are we right to qualify these two groups as 'lukewarm moralists'? Lukewarm, yes. The early Christians were willing to sacrifice themselves for the Gospel, for the cause. To die for it. Horribly, often. But what about us? Maybe some are willing to risk their lives. Respect to them! But most of us will do good, generous deeds, just so long as rescuing refugees doesn't involve personal liability or risk.


Is this akin to the current populism, mistrust of 'experts' etc? A rejection of reason? Voting for Trump, who is a racist, sexist, xenophobe and liar? Why should these characteristics not weigh more with people?

How do we regard people who definitely don't believe? Or who are happy to take part in church activities, but 'I don't go along with everything in the Creed'? Do we let them 'belong and then believe?'

What about being 'inclusive'?

What would Mary Magdalene say? We often ask, 'What would Jesus say?' But what would Mary say? If she met one of the lukewarm believers ...?

Why is her story the most important in the Bible? Compare the best-known passage, John 3:16:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

God - the creator - loves us. Only the creator could bring a dead person back to life. Think about that, in the light of the Mary Magdalene story. Really confront it. Confront the miracle. Don't just duck it, don't say it's too hard. Then perhaps being a Christian really will change you. Change you for the better.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant