

Study Thirteen: The Woman Who Learned True Love

The Company of Faithful People

The person whose life and ministry we wish to see was called Mary Magdalene or 'Maria Magdala'. We do not know now where Magdala was situated, but probably in Jesus' company this was the name given to distinguish which Mary she was. She heads the list of the women in the company: the others were Jesus' disciples, although we cannot be sure they were limited to the 12. It was a wonderful company because it travelled through villages and cities 'preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God'. This meant (as in Matt. 4:23-24; Acts 10:38; Matt. 12:28) telling the gospel John the Baptist preached, healing and casting out demons, and pointing to the liberty which was to come through the Cross and Resurrection. So it was a purposeful, happy group, sharing and living the good news in the presence of their Lord.

Faithful Because Healed and Convinced

The story of the disciples' calling is a powerful one: the story of the women no less wonderful. 'The women had been delivered from demons and ailments, some of which must have been through demonic possession. They must have loved the liberating ministry, and Jesus for his present liberation of them. An example of such liberation is seen in Luke 7:36-50 just prior to the present event in 8:1-3. Some women were of noble marriage. All loved the work and served the disciples 'out of their means'. It was not the custom of women to travel in such companies. We cannot understand the terror of demonic possession unless it has happened in us. We can gather some understanding from viewing such terrible situations. Demonic seizures come unannounced as with the demoniac of Gadara. In Mark 16:9 it is repeated that Jesus had cast 7 devils from Mary. It was a case of 'complete possession'. In some epilepsy we see something like demon possession. Missionaries witness to the terrible states of such possession. Demons make humans appear obscene: they demean God's beautiful creation of humanity. Jesus was ruthless where demons were concerned: they feared him as they feared 'the abyss'. We must consider the fearful states of all human beings in sinful depravity (Jer. 17:9; Mark 7:20-23; Rom. 3:9-18). We are not mere 'onlookers' of terrible states: we live in them until redeemed, forgiven and cleansed.

Jesus' Three Announcements of the Cross and Resurrection.

In Mark 8:31; 9:31, 10:32 Jesus had said he must go to Jerusalem. He was saying that at the end of their journey was a cross. Would they be identified with this? All were uneasy. It seems Mary of Bethany alone knew of the meaning of the death, and so she 'celebrated' it with the anointing of Jesus with the precious and fragrant nard (Cf. John 12: 1. ff.). What, then, was in the mind of Mary Magdalene?

Mary Magdalene at the Cross and the Burial

Matthew 27:55 and Mark 15:40 tell us the women were at the Cross and that they looked on from 'afar off'. In both cases Mary Magdalene is mentioned. In Mark 15:40-47 the women, Mary among them, watched the burial proceedings. In Matthew 27:57-61 the description of the burial event is much the same, ending with, 'Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre'. It takes little to imagine the shock and grief of Mary as she watched the events of the death and burial. She so deeply loved

him, and knew his great powers of defeating demons, healing sickness and liberating people from their guilts that she must have mourned what seemed to be a senseless death. That she thought it to be a death without resurrection is clear from the account we read in John 20. We can only image the grief and passionate sorrow that was in her heart from Friday night to Sunday morning. We do not know how long she and the other Mary were sitting opposite the sepulchre, nor her feelings as they rolled the stone over the opening of the tomb and sealed it.

Mary Magdalene and the Resurrection

We are told in John 20:1 that Mary came to the tomb early. It seems from Mark 16:9 that she was probably the first one at the tomb for 'Jesus appeared 'first to Mary Magdalene from who he had cast out demons'. It is not easy to rationalise the accounts of the women's visits to the tomb set out in the four Gospels. From John's account we gather that having seen that the tomb was opened Mary ran to Peter and John and told them what had happened. Matthew's account tells us that Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' went to the sepulchre and that an angel from heaven, appearing in splendour' told them, 'Be not afraid; for I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here for he has risen,' at which point he invited them to see that Jesus was indeed gone from the tomb. In Luke the women saw 'a vision of angels, who said that he was alive'. All of this should have convinced Mary that Jesus had risen, but the account in John 20 show that she obviously thought Jesus was dead.

Jesus' Appearance and Revelation to Mary

The facts are simple: at her news of the opened tomb Peter and John had come running, looked into the tomb, being eventually convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. They returned to tell the news to the other disciples. Mary was weeping and she stooped to look into the tomb where she saw two angels where the body of Jesus had lain, but was now not there. They asked her why she wept and she told them it was because they had taken away her Lord and she did not know where they had laid him. At that point she turned around and saw Jesus but did not recognise him as such. He asked why she wept and whom did she seek. She, thinking him to be the gardener of the place, said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.' She still thought he was dead. It was then that Jesus spoke her name and instantly she knew it was Jesus and cried out 'Rabboni!' In her passion of love she clung to him. He had to lift her out of her past associations and relationship with him, and tell her to cease clinging to him. His tender term 'Mary,' changed to the stronger term, 'Woman,' as he had once used the word with his mother at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee. He said, 'I am not yet ascended to my Father.' That sentence told everything. He was, indeed, risen: he was about ascend. She could not continue as in the past days. She was to go to the disciples and tell them that he was 'ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' The risen Christ had revealed to her that the old days had finished. It must have seemed like a disappointing change, but she was now lifted to a richer relationship, the warm and proper human elements now transformed into the relationship in which she would serve her Lord in an even more wonderful way. Much of this must have come from the fact that she now knew God to be Father: not only the Father of Christ the Son but also *her* Father!

Mary Magdalene Filled with the Holy Spirit

The Resurrection may have been intensified by the Ascension at which Mary was almost certainly present. Matt. 28:18-20: cf. I Cor. 15:6). We know by Acts 1:12-14 (cf. 2:4ff.) that Mary was amongst those who awaited Pentecost, and who therefore received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit-an event which would have brought her into the fullness of true love (*agape*) and set her up for the service to which she was undoubtedly called. What

a transformation from a women with seven demons to one who desired to share the gospel with the world! It was truly 'from demons to delight'!