

God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts.

The Feast of Mary Magdalene – July 2007

A sermon preached by Revd Joanna Coney, Associate Priest at St Peter's Wolvercote on the Feast of Mary Magdalene, 22.7.07

A man is walking his dog along the beach. He picks up a stick – and throws it into the water for the dog to fetch. The dog walks over the water - and brings it back. The man can't quite believe what he's seen – so he finds another stick – throws it into the water - and again the dog runs along on top of the waves and retrieves it. So he tries it a third time -just to make sure – and exactly the same thing happens. Meanwhile another man is watching what is going on and comes up to the dog owner and says “Wow! What an amazing dog – I have never in all my life seen anything like it. I have never before met a dog – who couldn't swim!”

A silly story – but it does illustrate perhaps how our thinking and assumptions run on predetermined lines and how refreshing it is to see things sometimes from unexpected totally different and new perspectives.

And the more we study and ponder the way God deals with his people we cannot but appreciate that, to quote Isaiah – “his ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts”. God sees things from very different perspectives than ours. To begin to understand and know Him, we too need to learn to see things from unexpected and new perspectives.

For God certainly and frequently turns our expectations and assumptions inside out – and not least when we look at the people he chooses to use in his service – you and me for instance! Why me? Why you? Surely we are all unworthy and useless and he could find many more and better people to do his work! But again and again we see that God chooses the most unexpected people and deals with them in amazing and often surprising ways. The story of Mary Magdalene whom we remember especially to day, illustrates this perhaps more than any other.

But who was she? Well - if you want to wander into the realms of fantasy – along the Da Vinci Code route – she was a follower of Jesus who married him and became the mother of his children. If we look at Legends about her we find that after the resurrection she went to live in Ephesus with St John and maybe even married him - but this is far from sure. Some scholars suggest that she may have been the same Mary who anointed Christ's feet with precious ointment and dried them with her tears in Simon's house. And some believe she was the same Mary who was the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

While there is not total agreement about these claims– there are some beliefs about her that most scholars do hold in common:-

That she was a great sinner – probably a prostitute;

That she was the Mary from whom Jesus drove out 7 devils;

That, in response to her healing, she became one of the women who followed Jesus and cared for him throughout his ministry in Galilee;

That she was at the foot of the cross at the crucifixion;

That she was the first witness, or one of the first witnesses, of the resurrection - as we heard in our reading from John this morning.

By looking at that story more closely we can learn quite a lot about her. St John tells us that she came to the tomb alone (in the other three Gospels she is with the other women). She came very early in the morning – at the very first opportunity she could after the Sabbath when she would have been unable to do anything. Does this tell us something of the great love she had for Jesus – that she couldn't wait to get to the tomb as soon as she could?

We hear that she was shocked to see the stone rolled away and that she assumed his body had been removed by grave robbers. And she wept – again giving us a picture of her great love and great grief.

Mary is the person chosen by Christ to be the first witness of the Resurrection. And the resurrection is surely the greatest challenge ever to our linear thinking there could be – what could be more unlikely, more impossible, more unthinkable, more crazy and totally beyond our comprehension than that? Indeed - God's ways are **not** our ways – and Gods thoughts are **not** our thoughts.

So was the fact that Mary was chosen as the first witness to this amazing event perhaps because she needed it more than most? Was it perhaps because she had been the greatest sinner – and so she was in need of the greatest healing? Was it perhaps because she loved him so deeply with every fibre of her being?

So how is it, bearing in mind all he has done for her – and what a great love she had for him – that, until he speaks to her, **she doesn't even recognise Him?** And why is it that he tells her not to touch him – even though she had been ministering to him and close to him for probably three years throughout his ministry – and was present at his death – how could she **not** know him? How could she **not** long to touch him?

But through the resurrection God has done something totally new – and Mary has to learn to relate to Jesus in a totally new way. She now, like us, has to relate to Christ through faith alone - not through physical proximity. Thomas had to learn the same thing – he had to hear Christ say to him 'Blessed are they who have **not** seen and yet believe'. To know God, it is faith that is the one crucial and necessary thing. Mary didn't recognise Jesus because he was not what she expected to see - it was altogether beyond her imagining. What she thought she was seeing was the gardener.

But it was that 'gardener' that turned out to be the risen Lord. Christ had become something new – and was revealed to her in the appearance of an ordinary person - a lesson surely for us. If we would see God we are to look at ordinary things – at ordinary people and find him there. We believe that through our baptism each and every one of us carries the spark of Christ within us – and it is

in looking for, and relating to this spark in other people that we can and will meet Christ. In a very few minutes now Jessica will be baptised – and the spark will be lit within her too.

In our reading from Corinthians this morning Paul reminds us – ‘From now on we regard no one from a human point of view – if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation – everything old has passed away: everything has become new’.

If we are in Christ we have become a new creation.

God is found in unexpected places – and in unexpected ways – and we have to be on the look out for Him where we least expect to find him. And above all we shall find him in unexpected people – in Mary Magdalene – in the gardener – in me and in you. We shall find him

in the people we love

in the people we work with

in the people in the street

in the people we find it hard to love

in the people sitting next to us here this morning.

But – to get back to Mary – when she does at last recognise Jesus – the risen Christ - what he says to her is ‘Go to my brothers and tell them...’ And she went to the disciples and announced ‘I have seen the Lord’. She does not keep things to herself, but immediately goes out and shares the Good News – the Gospel - the amazing reality of the resurrection – with others. The Good News – the Gospel – of the Resurrection is not something we can or should keep to ourselves.

From St Paul again: “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all - so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them”. What an amazing message this is for the world! Amen.