

Holding on and letting go

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Dr Rob Gilbert* at 10.00am at St Peter's, Wolvercote, on Sunday 22nd July, 2012.

Readings: Song of Solomon 3, 1-3; 2 Corinthians 5, 14-17; John 20, 1-2, 11-18

The readings for this week and last week have something interesting in common. Last week the Gospel reading was Mark's account of the death of John the Baptist, used to set what Jesus was doing in context. Herod's fascination with Jesus was coloured by the fact he knew, he heard and he was likewise fascinated by, John the Baptist. So in the middle of a systematic retelling of Jesus' preaching ministry we were reminded of the forerunning ministry of the Baptist, and by that of the incarnation of Jesus and the accounts of Jesus' birth. And John's death reminds us of the end awaiting Jesus – as it said in last week's Gospel, John's disciples "came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb".

Today for the feast of Mary Magdalen we have a reading that follows on from Jesus' own burial, from the end of the Gospel – the story of Jesus' resurrection and how Mary was its first witness. Last week, then, birth and incarnation, then death, and now resurrection. Inserted into the Ordinary Sundays after Trinity we are treated to reminders of the beginning and the end, and of why we are here at all worshipping the God revealed in Jesus. I think that this feast of Mary Magdalen is one we should celebrate with particular joy. Mary Magdalen is someone with whom I like to think we can easily sympathise and identify. She was a woman whom Jesus healed – casting out seven demons we are told. So, she was someone to whom Jesus meant a new start in life. She was someone dramatically saved by her faith, and someone who would not give up on her friendship with the man she calls in today's reading Rabbouni – even after everyone else has fled, she remains, because she loves him. Mary was also someone who helped to support Jesus and his disciples – she was one of the women who provided for them out of her resources, so she was an independent woman. And we are reminded this week how, according to all the narratives, it was Mary Magdalen who played the primary role in first witnessing to the resurrection. It was she who first experienced Jesus' new and unlimited life, transformed out of death by the power of God. This role makes Mary the apostle to the apostles, it makes her a central figure in our faith. Yet she is also someone who required rescue, who required forgiveness, and who treasured the people she loved so much she did not want to let them go. She is someone like us.

To put Mary's story in context we are given a beautiful passage from the Song of Solomon about *seeking* and *finding* and *holding onto* "him whom my soul loves". It's a passage that emphasises the kind of passionate commitment that Mary herself shows. In this passage the response to finding the person we love is the most natural one: it says, "I held him, and would not let him go". But contrast that to the outcome of the meeting of Jesus and Mary in the Easter garden: Jesus says, "Do *not* hold on to me." These represent two contrasting attitudes to people we love – we want to hold on to them, and we know we need to let them go. To love someone means that we are yelling internally "How wonderful you exist!", and "You make me glad!" But part of being glad that someone exists, part of loving them, *has* to be wanting them to have their independence, wanting them to live their lives freely. It's a bittersweet tension – one which parents feel very strongly, but which will come into all loving relationships

– the tension between wanting to spend more and more time with someone, and knowing they must go away. The tension between wanting more and more of what we have now...and knowing that we are called into an unknown future which contains risks.

Why does Jesus tell Mary not to hold onto to him? Why does he warn her off when her desire to embrace him is the most natural thing, what we would do in this situation meeting someone whom we love risen from the dead? It seems to me that Jesus' new status or role, begun in the resurrection, is one of fully universal availability. You and I don't have to and couldn't live lives of universal availability where we would be there for everyone and anyone, any time. We would quickly become exhausted or go mad. Part of the meaning of Jesus' resurrection is that he has become universal, he has become the person to whom anyone can turn, and the route through which anyone can know God, because he has conquered everything that limits human existence and above all death. So, however often Mary was able to hold on to Jesus before his crucifixion, in his resurrection he has passed beyond the kind of limited relationship in which anyone could hold on to him and not let him go. The bittersweet thing about love has been fully played out in the relationship between Mary and Jesus: she has held him and now must let him go. But thank Mary for that! Because her loss of Jesus is our gain; we are invited to share in his friendship alongside her.

[The reading from the Song of Solomon and the Gospel reading today, as I say, give us two possible attitudes to people we love: holding on to them, and letting them go. The reading from the letter to the Corinthians that they bracket speaks to exactly the same theme. Paul says something astonishing in this passage: "From now on ... we regard no one from a human point of view ... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: ... everything has become new". Our whole point of view is changed – from a human point of view to a divine one. Now, obviously, we are human, but being a follower of Christ is to do with seeking to take on Christ's perspective, Christ's view. It is about living no longer for ourselves but for him who died for us, as Paul says. The idea of God's creation of the world is closely related to this – God's creation makes the world free, and God loves it for its uniqueness and independence. God's creation is all about the world being cast in a divine relationship that gives it its freedom: that does not hold on to it but lets it go. The resurrection completes creation in a new way, by bringing into the middle of human life the relationship that God has to the world. In Genesis this is indicated by the statement of freedom "Let there be...", let there be light, let there be space, and so on. In the 2nd letter to the Corinthians it is indicated by talk of a divine perspective and a new creation in the middle of human life through the resurrection.

To hold on to people is to view them from a human point of view – we are human, so we will continue to do that. But to let them go, not to hold on to them and still to love them, is to view them from a divine point of view. As human beings we have to keep these two desires in tension – the love we have for those around us that makes us want to hold on to them, *and* the knowledge that to love someone is to allow them freedom and space to flourish in their own way. We have to tolerate within our own lives the bittersweet tension between "I held him, and would not let him go" and "Do not hold me".]

There is one final thing we must say about Mary today, and that is how wonderfully she is a champion for the ministry of women. This is a ministry she shares with the men who also knew and loved Jesus, and other women like Mary the wife of Cleopas, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Mary and Martha in Bethany. It is a ministry of service and witness and proclamation, just like the men except Mary Magdalen gets there first (much earlier than Paul) and shows more commitment than Peter. We have all benefited hugely from the witness and ministry of women around us; we benefit here now from the ministry of women like Viv and Jo; and we will benefit greatly in the years to come from women called to be bishops, called to be the apostles of our time. When that happens they will be women in a succession that began with a woman, an apostolic succession, starting in a garden where a man had risen from the dead and continuing in the women and men of our day. So let us thank God for Mary Magdalen, a model for our faith: for her healed and forgiven life, for her loving nature, and for her example of witness by her loyalty and in what she said, "I have seen the Lord."

Amen