

Mary Magdalene

What is worship?

Is it an opportunity to express how much we know about the Bible and in particular how much we know about those portions of scripture that concern the Lord Jesus? Is it a demonstration of our oratory, or our ability to put together some nice consecutive thoughts regarding the Saviour? It could so easily become any one of these things, but it is surely much more.

That is why it is lovely to see in our Bible, three examples of worshippers who were not numbered amongst the apostles, or any of the great men of the Bible. They are in fact three women. One of them is un-named – Luke simply calls her a “woman of the city who was a sinner”. She was of doubtful reputation, to say the least. The second woman is Mary of Bethany, as described for us in Luke 10, John 11, and John 12. The third woman is the subject of our consideration – Mary Magdalene. What is it that joins these three women together, for they were very different from each other to begin with. They were all marked by their devotion for the Saviour, and each came to express her devotion by bringing their spices and their ointments to the Lord Jesus. Each woman had her own personal reason for doing what she did. The un-named woman of Luke chapter 8 came because of the forgiveness she found at His feet. Mary of Bethany came because of the words she heard on that first occasion, and because of the raising of Lazarus as described in John chapter 11. Hence she came to him with her alabaster box of ointment in John chapter 12. She came to worship Him.

Finally, we have Mary Magdalene. Few people in the Bible can have been more mis-represented than this woman. The book “The Da Vinci Code” I understand suggest that the Lord had married Mary Magdalene and even had a family by her. Such things are hugely blasphemous of course, and without even a vestige of truth. These stories come about because men fail to recognise the deity and the perfection of the Lord Jesus. They also fail to grasp the pure love that a woman like Mary could have for the Lord Jesus. But as we shall see, Mary Magdalene is one of the loveliest characters of our Bible.

We find Mary at the tomb in John 20. The writer notes that it was early, and it was still dark. Here it seems is woman who cannot get there soon enough to the tomb. John has already in his gospel spoken of “early” and being “dark”. When Judas went out of the upper room in John 13, John adds the terse little statement, “and it was night”. We might say, “But we know it was night. Don’t we call that meal, “The Last Supper””. The Passover feast was eaten between the two evenings. But I think John is underlining for us the moral darkness that was then in the heart of Judas. The devil has entered into him, and he goes out to do his evil work. Judas was a man who had kept company with the Lord and His disciples for over three years, yet at the last he turned away from Him. He did it, not out of hatred towards, but out of the love of money. How would we know this? Matthew 27 says an interesting thing about Judas and the Lord. “When he saw that He was condemned”. The citizens of Nazareth tried to throw

Him over the brow of the hill but failed. The Lord in the boat rebuked the winds and the waves and the great storm because a great calm. Men took up stones to throw at the Lord but not one stone fell upon Him. Judas must have begun to think that Jesus was untouchable. He loved money of course, and now, he thought, he was going to make some money from his betrayal of the Lord Jesus and at the same time, no harm would come to Him. Perhaps by now, the pathway was proving too hard for Judas – too many nights sleeping rough on the Mount of Olives, too many months following a homeless stranger.

The darkness of John 13 highlighted the evil work of Judas, but this was anything but the case with Judas. She had come in our eagerness, just to be where He was. John also says in chapter 20, "It was early". It was also early in the morning when the chief priests and the rulers knocked on the door of Pilate. It was so early, they must have got Pilate out of bed. And why the early hour? They were eager to get rid of this Jesus of Nazareth as soon as possible. Remember what had been said earlier? "Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people". They didn't get that wish, hence they wanted the trial to be over quickly and for the sentence to be carried out before most of the city had wakened up to know what was happening. Hence "it was early" underlined the evil intent of the Lord's enemies. But Mary Magdalene came to the tomb when "it was early". She came out of devotion, out of her love towards the Saviour.

And what was she doing at the tomb? It was not because of forgiveness like the woman of Luke 8, nor was it because of the experiences of Mary of Bethany. Rather, Mary of Magdalene would describe, perhaps with tears in her eyes, that very first day that she met the Saviour. She was then in Galilee. She kept company with a number of women who had one thing in common. They were possessed of evil spirits. Mary was a particularly bad case – she was possessed of seven demons. Only the man Legion in Luke's gospel had more. So what a wretch Mary must have been. She would have been a mad woman – the object of ridicule yet at the same time perhaps the cause of no little fear. Then one memorable, unforgettable day, she met the Lord and those seven demons were cast out. We do not read of the miracle in detail, but I am sure she must have been just like Legion, of whom we read that he was sitting "clothed and in his right mind". Meeting the Lord Jesus was for Mary a life-changing, transforming experience. And was it not the same for us also? Our experience would be nothing like as dramatic, but it was true of us what is written in Colossians chapter 1 that we have been "delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the Son of His love". In Ephesians chapter 2, Satan is the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience". That was once true of us but now we know the reality of the verse in Philippians chapter 2, "It is God who worketh in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure". Other verses come to mind. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. All things have become new". We have put off the old man, and put on the new man. Were it only for salvation, we would have much cause to worship the Saviour.

Were we at the tomb that morning, we might have said to Mary, "So is that the only reason why you are here – because of that first meeting"? But of course

that first day for Mary and other of those women was only a beginning. In Luke chapter 8, it is said of them that "they ministered unto Him of their substance. They felt that they had received so much from Him that they just wanted to give something back to Him. That of course should also be true of us. We have received so much from Him that we should be looking for ways to repay Him. We can give Him our time, our energy, our money and we can be sure that nothing given to Him will go un-rewarded in that day.

That is the reason behind Romans chapter 12:1. "I beseech you therefore by the tender mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God". We owe it to God because of those tender mercies given to us.

These women from Galilee then disappeared off the page of holy scripture until we find them again at the cross. They formed part of that little company of women who stood afar watching those awful things that were taking place. We read of Mary and her companions that they "followed Him from Galilee". Here were women who just couldn't let go. Wherever He went, they went. It was not like the disciples. The Lord said to them, "Follow Me", and they obeyed. Theirs was a public call for theirs was to be a public ministry. But with these women, it was not the call of duty but a response of the heart. Those disciples who heeded the command to follow did so – all the way to Gethsemane: then they forsook Him and fled". Out of the 12 who set off with the Lord, one betrayed Him, one denied Him, but they all abandoned Him. Only John was still present at Calvary, out of the 12 who started off. But these faithful women kept on going, even to the cross. Although not mentioned since Luke 8, they must have been always close at hand. They were like Anna in Luke chapter 2. It is said of her that "she departed not from the temple but served God with fastings and prayers night and day". Because she was never far away, she came in that instant to see the babe in the arms of Simeon and to her his prophetic statement regarding the babe. Anna then went out and spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem. There may not have been many in that day, but Anna knew who they were and where they lived. If we keep company with the Lord and with His people, we will be aware of what's going on in spiritual matters.

Hence Mary Magdalene would have been able to tell you a great deal about the Lord Jesus. Having followed Him from Galilee, she would surely have heard many of those gracious words that fell from His lips. She must have witnessed many of His Miracles that He did on the way. So she could spend much time telling you about her Lord and Master.

On this fateful day, it had been early in the morning when the Lord had been tried and condemned. While Jerusalem still slumbered, these women had been alerted about the cross, and so they made their way to Calvary. Mary Magdalene was one of that little band. And what a comfort they must have been to the Lord. We read of His anguish in the Psalms. "I looked for some to take pity, and there was none. Instead, He saw men around the cross like animals. Strong bulls of Bashan beset Me round, dogs have encompassed Me. They gaped upon Him with their mouths have ravening and roaring lions". He must have been able to see those women who shed tears for Him, whose hearers went out to Him, for we read in John 19, how He said to His mother,

“Woman, behold thy son”.

We now come to John chapter 20. Mary had come that morning with her spices to anoint, as she thought, the dead body of their beloved Lord. But was her visit really necessary? After all, what could she have done that had not already been done by the two rich men, Joseph and Nicodemus? The latter had brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes and had embalmed the body of Jesus. Joseph had bought the linen cloth and had wrapped the Lord's body. But I believe these women felt that they just wanted to add their portion too, however small it might seem in comparison. And the Lord looks on the heart rather than quantity. John 19 says nothing about the cost of the 100 pounds that Nicodemus brought, yet in John chapter 12, Mary of Bethany brought one pound and the Bible says of it that it was “very costly”. It was precious because of the one who gave it.

So Mary Magdalene was at the tomb for a whole host of reasons. She remembered the first day that she met the Saviour – that life changing experience. She remembered the experiences of the journey from Galilee. Fresh in her mind was the agony of the cross. She would remember also the burial. Great men are often given a send off in the company of hundreds if not thousands of mourners. But the greatest man that ever lived had a funeral attended by probably less than 10 people - the two rich rulers and a handful of faithful women who wouldn't let go.

Mary comes to the tomb and sees the stone taken away. In verse 2, she runs to tell Peter and John, “They have taken away the Lord, and we know not where they have laid Him”. In verse 4 we read that the two disciples ran together, but that John arrived first. Various reasons have been given as to why John outran Peter including the assumption that John was the younger man. Can I make another suggestion? Would Peter not still be embarrassed by his denial of the Lord. Would he not be ashamed at his own actions. Now he has been told that the tomb is empty. Did the possibility enter into his mind that the Lord may have risen, and if so, what could He possibly have to say to Peter who had let Him down so badly.

First John, then Peter, entered in and discover that the Lord's body was no longer there. The linen clothes are mentioned three times over in verse 5,6, and 7. There was a message in the clothes, and in the way in which they lay within the tomb. Verse 12 tells us that the two angels were sitting, one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. At the head and feet of what? I think it was at the head and feet of the clothes. The clothes were still there but the body had gone. What does this tell us? Did men come and steal away the body of Jesus while the soldiers slept? - for this was the tale that would soon circulate around the city. Had they done so, why would they not have taken away the body as it was in the linen clothes? And even if they had unwrapped the body, why were the discarded clothes not lying in a heap on the ground as one might have expected. Naturally speaking, the Lord could not have removed the clothes Himself. He had been embalmed in one hundred pounds of spices, then wrapped in the linen. This was no act of body snatching. This was no escape act.. The only possible conclusion was that the body had risen from the dead and left the clothes undisturbed upon the ledge where the body had been. The writer John says this about himself in verse 8,

"He saw and believed". The other thing they noticed about the clothes was the napkin or face cloth, not lying with the linen clothes but wrapped together in a place by itself. There was an order about the whole scene that so impressed the two disciples.

John adds a further note – "For as yet they knew not the scripture that He must rise again from the dead". Does this not suggest that the scripture is more weighty evidence than that of the eye witnesses. And we might say in retrospect, should they not have been looking for His resurrection after all the sayings of the Lord Jesus on the subject?

1. John 2:1`9

"Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up again"

2. Matthew 12:40

"As Jonah was 3 days and nights in the whale's belly, even so shall the Son of man be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth"

3. Matthew 16:

"He must suffer many things...and be killed, and be raised again the third day"

The Lord's statements about rising again from the dead seem to have been lost on the disciples, but they were not lost on the Lord's enemies who came to Pilate and said, "We remember that deceiver said while he was yet alive, "In 3 days I will rise again"" (Matthew 27:63).

The disciples then in verse 10 came, looked, and then went away again to their own home. They left puzzled perhaps, perplexed, but away they went. What a contrast though in verse 11, "But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping". The feelings of Mary for the Saviour far excelled those of even Peter and John. Was this not the reason why the Lord appeared first to Mary and not to one of the disciples. Mary was first because she was the person on earth who missed Him and loved Him the most.

As Mary herself looks into the tomb, she sees two angels in white sitting. They ask her a question, "Woman, why weepest thou?" They knew of course what she did not yet know, that the Lord had risen from the dead. But Mary can only reply at this point, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid Him". Notice the change from verse 2. Then she said to Peter and John, "They have taken away the Lord and we know not where they have laid Him". But now she is saying to the angels, "my Lord", and "I" know not where they have laid Him. Her emotions are rising by the minute. Forget about the others, she is expressing her own personal feelings towards her beloved Lord. It underlines the fact that worship is a truly personal thing. Although it is true that the brother who takes part audibly on a Sunday morning is leading the company in worship, it is nevertheless true that he is expressing his feelings for the Saviour.

How is Mary affected by the appearance of the angels? We notice two things about her – her lack of fear and her lack of interest in the angles. Why do we say, "her lack of fear"? It is because that, on most angelic appearances in our Bible, fear was produced in the heart of those men and women who saw them.

Hence in Luke chapter 1, the first words of Gabriel towards Zacharias are "Fear not, Zacharias". Again he appears to Mary, the Lord's mother, and again he addresses her, "Fear not Mary". Later to the shepherds in the fields above Bethlehem, the opening words are, "Fera not, behold I bring you tidings of great joy". As we towards the end of the gospel story, we read in Matthew 28 of the appearing of the angel of the Lord who sat upon the stone that had sealed the tomb. Outside the tomb were four big brave Roman soldiers, but when they saw the angel, "The keepers did quake and became as dead men". But there appeared to be no fear in the heart of Mary Magdalene as she faced not one angel but two. Why would this be. In I John chapter 4, the apostle writes, "There is no fear in love. Perfect love casteth out fear". That is what Mary had that morning – perfect love towards her beloved Lord and Master.

Then there was the lack of interest that Mary showed towards the angels. Verse 14 says, "She turned herself back". Would you have turned you back on angels? So why then did Mary do this? She would have told you later, "I didn't go to meet angels. I went to meet the meet. Angels held no attraction for me. I only wanted to see Him". O for a fraction of the love in our hearts that was shown that morning by Mary Magdalene.

Now in verse 14, she turned away and saw Jesus standing. The verse concludes, "And knew not that it was Jesus". We cannot explain why she did not recognise Him immediately. Was this lack of recognition a work of God for the moment, just as those two on the Emmaus did not know Him till He sat down at the table with them to break bread? "Their eyes were holden that they did not know Him". In verse 15, the stranger speaks to her, "Woman, why weepest thou"? Whom seekest thou?" The angels asked only the first question. They perhaps could not understand the woman's grief. But the Lord knew why she wept. So why then did He pose the question, "Whom seekest thou?" He wanted to hear the response from Mary herself. He wanted her to express her feelings. Is that not what prayer is? The Lord knows what we want even before we ask it, but He wants to hear it from our lips. In Luke 24, when the three eventually arrived at the home in Emmaus, the scripture says, "He made as though He would have gone further". Why did He do this? He was waiting for the invitation to enter. When the Lord walked upon the sea, it seemed as if He would have passed by the ship. He was waiting for the disciples to invite Him in. In Revelation 3:20, the Saviour is standing outside the door. Why is He outside? He is waiting for the invitation to go in. "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and sup with him".

Still, Mary does not know Him. "She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said, "Sir, if thou have borne Him hence, tell me where thou hast laid Him, and I will take Him away". Here was a slip of a girl who was offering to carry away the dead body of a full-grown man. Truly faith derives strength beyond what is natural. SO at this moment of time, nothing was beyond Mary. "I will bera Him away".

At last, in verse 16, the Lord reveals Himself to this dear woman. In Luke 24, He had to deliver a sermon to these two travellers on that journey. The journey would have lasted perhaps a couple of hours and in that time, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures, the things concerning Himself". Their hearts

had been out of tune with Him. We might well ask the question, "Why were they on this journey at all, leaving Jerusalem behind the?". Had they not heard of amazing events that very morning? They are able to tell the Lord about certain women who had gone early to the tomb and found it empty. They were able to recount how those women had seen a vision of angels which said that He was alive. Then the apostles themselves had gone to the tomb and found it so, even as the women had said. Did these two travellers not believe the women, or the angels, or the apostles? They should have been still in Jerusalem to establish what was behind these stories. So why were they not?

I think there are three reasons.

1. A low appreciation of the Lord – "a prophet mighty in word and in deed"
2. A poor understanding of the purpose of God. "We trusted it had been He which should have redeemed Israel".
3. Unbelief "O fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken"

These two in Luke 24 needed a sermon to put right their thoughts regarding the Lord Himself and His kingdom, and also needed to strengthen their faith. Mary didn't need a sermon. She only needed a word – "Mary". I wonder what will be the first word that the Saviour will say to me when I meet Him in heaven. Will it be simply, "Walter"?

One point worth mentioning is how that the Lord, in each of His resurrection appearances just seemed to meet the particular need of the people or person that He met. Thus the two on that Emmaus road set off with sad hearts, but when the journey ended they had glad hearts. "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us by the way". Thus sad hearts became glad hearts. Mary Magdalene came with a broken heart – the Lord mended a broken heart. The ten disciples were gathered in a room which had a locked door for fear of the Jews. The Lord's first words to them were, "Peace unto you". Thomas had a doubting heart – the Lord came to dispel the doubts. Peter had a failing heart – the Lord came to strengthen His failing disciple. It is just a picture of what our Great High Priest does for us today. He gives us just what we need.

So, how does Mary respond to this one word from the Saviour? She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni, which is to say, Master". The word "Rabboni" is used on only one other occasion in the Bible. Blind Bartimaeus used it in Mark 10:51. The Lord asked him, "What wilt thou that I should do unto thee". Bartimaeus replies, "Lord, that I might receive my sight". The word "Lord" is again, "Rabboni". Rabboni means "My great master". It is a more honourable title than simply "Rabbi", "my master", the title which the Pharisees used to love being called by others.

Perhaps Mary at this point stooped to grasp the feet of the Lord Jesus like those women spoken of in Matthew 28 who came and held Him by the feet. So, why was Mary not permitted to do so? In Matthew, there is no mention at all of the Lord's ascension. Indeed, in Matthew 28:10, the Lord tells the women, "Go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see Me". The Lord directs them to another place on earth. But in John 20, the Lord says to Mary, "Touch me not for I am not yet ascended to My Father". His ascension

was before Him – He was not to be detained here on earth. Further words follow in verse 17, “Go tell my brethren.... I ascend unto My Father and your Father; and to My God, and your God”. Notice that He does not say “Our Father”. His relationship with His Father was always distinct, even from ourselves who can cry “Abba, Father”. In Ephesians 1, we learn that we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ, but there is special place reserved for Him, He is at the right hand of God in the heavenlies. But the Lord has here brought us into a special relationship with Himself. In the gospels, He elevated the disciples from being servants only – they were also His friends and therefore party to His ways. But now He goes even further for He says “Go tell my brethren”. It is not that we would ever dare call Him “brother”, but that He can call us “brethren”. Hebrews 2:11 says of Him that “He is not ashamed to call them brethren”. The words are remarkable – “He is not ashamed”. He had to fit Himself for this role, by becoming a man and suffering here as we do.

The word “Father” here introduces us to what is the significant feature of the Christian age. We have entered into a more intimate relationship with God than Israel ever knew. It is true that David in the Psalms spoke of God as “our Father”, but David had a greater appreciation and intimacy with God than any other Jew then or perhaps since. It is true that God called Israel His son. Hosea 11:1 says, “Out of Egypt have I called my son”. Israel though never called Him Father. He was Jehovah, the ever-living One, the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.

It is noteworthy that the Lord introduces this idea to a woman. You will remember that the concept of Christian worship was first spoken of to the Samaritan woman by a well. Thoughts of worship and nearness are expressed to these two women for they are to be held with feelings and affection and not simply cold doctrinal statements.