

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

**St Mary Magdalene's Day, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2007**

II Corinthians 5.14-17; John 20.1-2, 12-18

‘Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew ‘Rabbouni!’, (which means Teacher). (John 20.16).

This is my favourite verse in the whole Bible, and yet it is probably one of the most difficult to read out loud. It is my favourite verse because it expresses so beautifully the nature of a Christian's personal relationship with our Lord. It is very difficult to read, because so much hangs on just that one word, ‘Mary!’.

‘Mary’ – what's in a name? How do you think Jesus said it? How do you like to hear it read? – with tenderness... commanding authority... a laugh in his voice... a searching quality?

There are so many ways of saying a name, and they all mean something different. What we can most certainly exclude from our mental reconstruction of this moment are ways of saying a name which are without love or sensitivity. We may sometimes have experienced hearing our names said in a

bossy, judging or threatening tone. But such a tone has no place in this story. However Jesus said ‘Mary’, he evoked joy and responding love. What we are being let into here is a moment of great intimacy.

Did you notice in the Gospel story how everything changed from the moment Mary of Magdala stopped being addressed as ‘Woman’, and started being called by name? It was a moment of new creation for her – or rather, the moment which summed up and sealed the new creation she had been experiencing within herself ever since she first met Jesus and was – as St Luke tells us – delivered from ‘seven devils’.

In today's Gospel, she is known for her true, inner self. The Master or Teacher who calls her by name does not view her according to human prejudice, or by reference to her troubled past. He knows her as a free and healed person; he knows her for who she may become, in him and with his strength. He himself stands before her, liberated from the death she had seen him die with her own eyes, and this assures her that there is most certainly a power greater than all the forces of sinfulness, sickness, mental distress, and human shame which threaten all the time to pull us down. ‘Mary!’, he says – so much in a name.

But it is not the name in itself which conveys his meaning. Mary, after all, was the most common of names for first-century Jewish women. Five or six of them appear in the New Testament alone. To be named 'Mary' was to be named without a great deal of imagination on the part of your parents. Or perhaps with something worse than lack of imagination..

Because the name 'Mary' doesn't just suggest ordinariness – its literal meaning is related to 'bitterness'. (Do you remember, from the lovely little story of Ruth in the Old Testament, how Naomi (whose name meant 'pleasant') begged to be called 'Mara', or 'bitter', in her widowhood and after the death of her sons, for – as she said 'the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me' (Ruth 1.20)?)

Could it be that so many girls were called by this name which meant 'bitterness' because their birth – the birth of daughters – had been a bitter disappointment to their parents? It's worth pondering, if only because that sentiment has been so widespread in human history, and is still so widely felt in the world today; not much in our culture, to be sure – but in many others, where countless girl-children have a bitter start in what often turns out to be a wretched life. Think what it must be like to know that you were a

disappointment to your parents even before you drew your first breath...

And now, think what it must be like for such a person to be addressed by Jesus with the love, recognition and hope which his voice gives to their name. In Christ there truly can be a new creation – not only of individuals, but of cultures and ways of seeing the world. Using Paul's words from our Epistle, 'now...we regard no one from a human point of view...everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (II Corinthians 5.16,17).

Don't let anyone tell you that the Gospel isn't good news, and doesn't need to be spread any more! The lives of millions of women have been transformed by it – and millions more need that change, that fundamental change in people's point of view.

'Mary' – what's in a name? A great deal, when it is known and spoken by Christ, or on his behalf. This is why baptism is so closely linked to naming – not in the obvious sense which would treat it as a 'naming ceremony'; but in the much profounder sense that our confirmation service now gives witness to, when the Bishop says to each candidate, 'Mary ...John...Tracy....Dean (or whatever); God has called you by name and made you his own.'

Baptism is a sign of new creation – a sign that God is *calling* us by name, making us his own, recognising our true identity and potential in him. Our parents may have chosen weird or crummy names for us; names with unfortunate meanings, or no meaning at all. Or we may like our names very much, and be grateful for the connotations they hold. But either way, it doesn't matter. In the mouth of Christ, on the lips of members of his Body here on earth, your name – my name – is used as a sign of individual uniqueness and value. It is used to signal that we each have our calling, our special purpose, within the greater purposes of God. So much in a name.

The immediate purpose of God for Mary of Magdala was to make her the very first Resurrection witness – the 'Apostle to the Apostles', as ancient tradition calls her. How sad, then, that those to whom she bore her message were still caught in old human points of view, and felt that such a message, coming from a woman, must be unreliable – even hysterical.

This reminds us how tragically easy it is for us, followers of Christ though we are, to remain enmeshed in old, prejudiced ways of seeing other people – human points of view which are not shaped by belief in the new creation. We don't take seriously those words which we like to sing in the hymn,

'Praise my soul the King of Heaven' - the words 'ransomed, healed, forgiven'. We don't take these words seriously enough either in our own lives, or in the way we perceive other people. We're too often locked into judgements – whether of ourselves or of others – which are based on past performance rather than future potential in Christ. We too often share in cultural presuppositions which put people into limiting boxes.

But Jesus goes on calling us by name – us and all those around us. He keeps on offering us our true identity, renewed and healed in him. He keeps on offering us freedom in his service – a particular job to do rooted in his love for us.

At the Communion rail I try to use people's names as I administer the sacrament – if I can. Sometimes, of course, I don't know people; sometimes I can't remember names even though I've been told them several times; sometimes I make mistakes. But I take the risk of trying to do it because I believe that Communion is an intimate moment as we reach out to touch the Risen Jesus. It is a gateway into the Garden-moment where Jesus says to each one of us our name, and we turn to him, saying Master...Teacher... Lord... Saviour....!'

