

Maundy Thursday: Bishopscourt Chapel, Sale; 9 April 2020

Through the Eyes of Mary Magdalene, Part 2

My name is Mary. The twelve call me 'the Magdalene' because I come from Magdala, by the shore of Lake Galilee. Others call me all sorts of things – especially the men. He always just called me 'Mary'. Let me tell you about those few days – those tragic, traumatic, thrilling days – which turned my world – what seemed like the whole world – upside down...

Passover time, *Pesach*, that great festival of liberation – our story of origin as a people. A night on which countless tables were being prepared, and heads of households poring over the words of the Seder – this uniquely ordered meal. How does it begin?

This is the bread of poverty which our forebears ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry enter and eat; let all who are needy come to our Passover feast.

His table was always like that – roomy – with a space set for the hungry, the needy – which was all of us, basically; which is me.

The bread of poverty: unleavened bread because there was no time to tarry on that fateful night; bitter herbs because the lives of our forebears were bitter in Egypt. What is the one who presides at table to say: 'In every generation let us each regard ourselves as though we had come out of Egypt.'

Everyone yearned to keep this feast in Jerusalem, and here we were. Why, then, did it seem like we walking right back through the Red Sea and headlong into bitterness?

The men – Peter, James, John, and the rest of the twelve – were in a flap about getting things ready in time and finding a room for us to eat together, somewhere private. They were edgy. He was quiet, sort of focussed; preoccupied.

I don't think the twelve really wanted us there, but he never seemed to mind who was with him. Still, we stayed in the background – did the 'serving' things, you know. Actually, that's not quite true. It was he who did the serving things – the serving thing.

Was this our Passover come early? We were a household of sorts, that's for sure, and eating with him was often a celebration – an experience – of liberation. Somehow he always transformed the bread of poverty into something else, as he did tonight.

And after supper, that business with the feet... The twelve couldn't handle it: too intimate, he was too vulnerable – they didn't know how to just receive from him, they never had – always needing to earn his love, prove their worth. When he got round to Peter, Peter freaked out. Poor Peter. Always so reasonable, so head-driven. But this was for the heart, and it touched mine at what felt like the very source of its beating.

As I watched him move around the table on his knees, washing their feet, I remembered that day at Simon's house – Simon the Pharisee. I didn't have a name then. No one called women like us by name, or knew us for who we were, only for what we did for a living – or what they imagined it to be, anyway.

It was alright for them with their wealth and their piety and their places of privilege – they could afford to be righteous. I had to settle for scraps, fragments, the bread of poverty, and gather these any way I could.

But I had seen him once in a crowd, and he at looked at me – right at me – with such understanding and compassion as I had never known – never dreamt of knowing. He seemed to have time – time to tarry with the likes of us, with the likes of me.

I had this alabaster jar of pure nard, costly stuff – the only thing of any real value amongst my belongings. Overcome by an urge to make contact with him – to let him know what that one look had meant to me – I grabbed the jar and rushed to Simon's house. No one knew what to do when I blundered in and threw myself down at his feet – no one, that is, except him. He could receive, as well as give, and he let me do exactly what I needed to do, which was to weep: to howl and sob for the sorry state of my loveless life.

He just sat there as I poured it all out on him: a mess of tears, oil, and hair. It was the most natural thing in the world to do, to take that jar, break it, and spend it all – waste it, some would say – did say, in fact – in that one precious moment of complete acceptance.

That was the start of everything for me – everything that mattered. Ever since then I've been with him and the others on the road – the road to where, I often wonder? And now here tonight, he's done a similar thing for us. Kneeling at our feet, wetting them, wiping them, without a word.

So, if that was a beginning, why does this feel so much like an ending?

The mood at table was heavy, serious. There had been trouble brewing – we all knew it – but things might blow over...? Somehow, looking at his eyes, at the depth of his love and sadness, I sensed otherwise.

Things broke up quickly after that. Judas left in a hurry after an exchange of words. The rest of us cleaned up a bit and headed out into the night. The Passover moon was covered by a mass of thick, dark clouds, pressing down on the city like a millstone, or perhaps a tombstone...

We went across the Kidron Valley with him once more, to the olive garden. He seemed troubled, but when I suggested we leave him be he said he wanted the company. If I'd known what was about to happen I'd never have left the safety of that room. As a bad dream it unfolded. I wonder if he knew what was coming? And if he did, why didn't he run, as – one way or another – we all did that night?

Somewhere in the middle of it all, in the shadows between the High Priest's house and the Roman precinct, Thursday slipped into Friday, but I musn't get ahead of myself...

When it all gets too much I take myself back to that room, that table, where we shared the bread of poverty – and as I pour it all out at his feet again I am fed by him who poured himself out that night before our eyes. It was, I would come to realise, his Passover: his impossibly difficult passage, and ours too: our story of origin as a people after all, rewritten with his blood, retold on the parchment of his broken body.

Let all who are hungry enter and eat;
let all who are needy come to our feast.

+Richard, Gippsland