

## **Palm Sunday: St St Paul's, Sale; 5 April 2020**

### *Through the eyes of Mary Magdalene, Part 1*

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...

It began a few days before Passover. I could just picture Jerusalem as we set out from Bethphage a few miles away: chock-a-block with tired but excitable pilgrims, jostling and haggling in the narrow, dusty streets; the smell of sacrifice in air. When we came within sight of the city my stomach began to churn.

At the outskirts of Bethany people had begun to recognise him. We'd spent so much time together here: the house of my brother Lazarus and sister Martha was like a second home to him. He rode a donkey leading us down the valley and up, up to Jerusalem, the Temple mount brilliant in the spring sunshine.

He sent two of us on ahead with some cryptic instructions about a colt. Sure enough they were back an hour later with a beast in tow. It had been just as he said. It had always been just as he said.

Friends let their children tag along with our little procession. Some ran on ahead and shimmied up the date palms, stripping branches to wave and lay down on the road, creating – just for a moment – a green, leafy highway, fit for a king. The adults joined in now, throwing their cloaks in his path.

A few even called out: *Hashoana! Hashoana!* 'Hosanna': 'save us'! It's what you'd cry if you had fallen into a deserted well and someone appeared above you in the circle of light with a rope in hand. It's what you say when you know you have been saved – a shout of exultation in the presence of the One who saves. *Hashoana! Hashoana!*

By the time we reached the Temple gate this trickle had grown into a stream, and then a *river* of people. It felt more like *Purim* than Passover – a real carnival. What was written in the scroll of Zechariah (9:9)?: 'Rejoice O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and glorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'. Was the sight of him on that colt what was stirring us up?

Zephaniah's words, too, came to mind (3:14b, 15b-18a): 'Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives you victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; . . . as on a day of festival.'

A warrior? Victory? Again my stomach shifted. Suddenly it seemed that we were blessing him as just such a one, come to restore the throne to Israel. What did they expect of him this delirious lot? What did I expect of him? A political movement? A coup? A king? The Romans were as entrenched as ever – the latest in a long line of occupying or despoiling powers stretching back to Assyria – right back to Amalek on our way out of Egypt – why should things be any different now? And what if he should disappoint them . . . should disappoint us?

All of a sudden we were in the lengthening shadow of the Temple. It was getting late and our company was tired, hungry. We drew a few odd looks from the grimly pious and the singing died out; an anticlimax.

He was quiet – silent in fact – as he stepped down and made his way inside the house of the one he dared to call *Abba*, 'Father'. When we came out the crowds had dispersed, and so did we – all the way back to Bethany. No palm branches or rousing choruses this time. Just him, the twelve, and a few like me who always seemed to hang around.

No one spoke much as we trudged back in the evening light through the Kidron Valley past Gethsemane – a favourite place of his for peace and quiet and a spectacular vantage point. There were plenty of backward glances as we crested the Mount of Olives with the sun slipping away behind the great city. Someone tried to lighten the mood: 'Musn't look back. Remember Lot's wife!' But no one laughed.