

On Palm Sunday I'll be offering the first instalment of a four-part homily series. Parts 2 to 4 will be delivered during the services for the Triduum on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. The title of this series is 'Through the eyes of Mary Magdalene.'

Mary Magdalene appears in all four gospels at crucial moments in the narrative. She is named as one of those who kept vigil at the crucifixion, and who returned to minister to Jesus' body in the tomb. In John's account she is the first disciple to whom the risen Christ appears. Thus she is often referred to in Christian tradition as 'apostle to the apostles'.

It seems fitting, then, to experience the last days of Jesus' public ministry 'through her eyes': to let her tell or retell this story. Such imaginative reconstruction of the biblical narrative, and the poetic license it requires, is a time-honoured interpretive practice in Judaism, known as 'midrash', the noun from a verb which means 'to search, or examine'.

So, in this Holy Week of the Christian calendar, we search afresh, through the perspective of the Magdalene, the story that tells us who and whose we are.

We do so not in order that we may 'find' ourselves in her story; but rather that we may, once again, make this story our story, allowing it to shape the way we understand ourselves, even as we tell it in our own voice.

I invite you therefore to enter into the 'story-world' of Mary's experience – to let it be just that: story – and to honour the places in your own story, be they delightful or costly, to which hers may lead you, especially in these uncharted waters.

By way of background, the figure of Mary Magdalene has been much romanticised, and interest in the mythology surrounding her has been rekindled by Dan Brown's best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code*. One of the Gnostic gospels is attributed to her and in another (that of Philip) she is portrayed as being especially close to Jesus – an idea preserved in popular culture by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

As with these extrapolations of the canonical witness, there is no scriptural support for the tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, nor for the frequent identification of her with the nameless woman who anoints Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50), which I will shamelessly rehearse in the next instalment (Maundy Thursday), although in medieval Western thought she was often conflated with Mary of Bethany. She is introduced immediately after this episode by Luke (8:1-3) as one from whom seven demons were cast out, along with other women who are described as supplying material support for Jesus' ministry. This is consistent with the fact that Magdala – the city from which her name derives – was, at that time, a large administrative and commercial centre on the western shore of Lake Galilee, known for its lucrative salt trade.