

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Sep 19th 2014

Today's Gospel mentions Mary Magdalen, a New Testament figure who has always fascinated me. CatholicCulture.org has a very good summary of the Biblical references to Mary Magdalene, and some of what I write here is drawn from the summary by Fr. William Sauders, posted on that site.

As a child, I used to get confused between the "two Marys." Of course, the one with whom we are more familiar is the mother of Jesus. As I grew in understanding, I found Mary Magdalene interesting in her own right. She appears fairly frequently in the Gospels and it's clear that she was close to Jesus, perhaps the female equivalent of an apostle.

Although she has been canonized as St. Mary Magdalene, there was some doubt as to whether several references are to her. Arguably, there could be as many as three different women involved. The Mary we meet today is unambiguously Mary Magdalene who is mentioned several times in the Gospels as having had seven demons cast out. Luke, from whom the Gospel is taken today, refers in the previous chapter to an anonymous penitent woman. Finally, there is the Mary — sometimes referred to as Mary of Bethany — who was the sister of Martha and Lazurus.

Since the time of Pope St. Gregory — whose papacy extended from 590 to 604 — the Roman Catholic Church has taught that all three are the same person. In the Eastern Church, the teaching is that the reference is to different women, and St. Mary Magdalen and St. Mary of Bethany have different feast days. It's a bit of a puzzle, but the case for all three being the same is quite convincing. The penitent woman from earlier in Luke comes to Jesus to wash his feet while Jesus is in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Simon is scornful of her as being untouchable because of her sinful nature, a fairly clear reference to sins of sexuality. Magdalene also derives from a word that can be translated as adulteress.

Jesus, however, forgives this penitent woman, and it thus makes sense that she would show up again so soon in his Gospel with a reference to having had seven demons cast out.

The harder one is matching up Mary Magdalene with Mary the sister of Martha and Lazurus. Until I studied the matter, I thought that they must be two different Marys. However, it seems unlikely that someone so important that Jesus would travel for days to come to her house to raise her brother from the dead would appear without introduction. Moreover, Martha is angry with Jesus when he arrives because he did not arrive in time to prevent Lazurus's death, which indicates a great deal of familiarity between Jesus and this family. Moreover, in this story, this Mary — Mary of Bethany to the Eastern Church — also washes Jesus' feet and dries them with her hair, exactly as did the penitent woman.

The woman who unambiguously is Mary Magdalene was present with Jesus during his crucifixion and discovered his tomb empty on the first Easter. She showed vastly more courage than did Simon Peter, who denied that he knew Jesus when confronted the night before the crucifixion.

In any event, I find the story of Mary Magdalene uplifting. No matter how humble our origins, no matter how scandalous our pasts, it is never too late to let Jesus into our hearts and be saved.

Pat Borchers - Creighton University Student