

## Convent 2016

Tonight if we were in a TV show, where people have to guess who people are - we would say: Would the real Mary Magdalene please step forward?

Our misconceptions about Mary Magdalene, go back to some of the earliest Christian theologians and Biblical scholars, so we may be excused. Pope Gregory, in a sermon preached in 591, suggests that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. He says: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be Mary from whom the seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices?" (Homily 33). Even today in popular culture Mary Magdalene is firmly established as the fallen woman made good. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical Jesus Christ, Superstar cemented this, and Martin Scorsese's film The Last Temptation of Christ, took it one step further, building on speculation that Mary may even have been Jesus' lover.

In fact there is only one mention of Mary Magdalene in all four of the gospels prior to the crucifixion. In Luke 8:1-3 we read: "*[Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.*" There is no evidence here of a fallen woman, or a prostitute, but simply someone whom Jesus had healed, a woman of some status and means, who was

able to support the mission of Jesus and the disciples. Beyond that any detail is purely speculative.

Mary Magdalene was without doubt a significant figure in the leadership of the early Christian community. The medieval theologian Peter Abelard (d. 1142) described her as "apostolarum apostola", or the apostle to the apostles. Other than Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene is the only woman in all four gospels to witness Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Mary Magdalene is there with the beloved disciple at the cross, when the other disciples have fled, she is there as he is placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and she is the first to encounter the risen Christ in all four of the gospels.

There is even a Gospel of Mary Magdalene, although it did not quite make it into the Bible. In this we read of Mary comforting the other disciples:

*They were distressed and wept greatly. "How are we going to go out to the rest of the world to announce the good news about the kingdom of the Child of Humanity?" they said. "If they didn't spare him, how will they spare us?" Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, addressing her brothers and sisters, "Do not weep and be distressed nor let your hearts be irresolute. For his grace will be with you all and will shelter you. Rather we should praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us human beings.*

She is also depicted in this gospel as a visionary: "[Mary] said, 'I saw the Lord in a vision' ... and he answered me, 'Blessed are you for not wavering at seeing me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure.'"

So, whether as a penitent, or as an influential and powerful leader of the early Christian community, we remember Mary Magdalene today and give thanks for her life and witness. May her example inspire us to do good works and give glory to God. Amen.