

Lenten Study 2021 – Week 4: Mary and Paul



It is clear from the many references in the Gospels that Mary had an especially important place among the first disciples of Jesus. The fact that she is named at all, let alone the numerous instances, tells us something all on its own, given how little we know about most of the members of the early Christian community. This stands out even more due to the relatively sparse details available to us regarding the disciples and supporters of Jesus who were women. We know Mary Magdalene traveled along with Jesus and his inner circle, and that she was with him in numerous other key moments and places in his ministry. And yet, through the conflation of narratives associated with various unnamed women in the bible, her identity and position alongside the twelve became a bit confused.

Some have even gone so far as to suggest that this distortion may have taken place with some intentionality out of a concern that people would be scandalized by the notion of a woman with such a close relationship to Jesus, or take it as an occasion to challenge other assumptions about gender and the roles of women in leadership which were not welcome points of discussion for most of the Church's history. Many historians cite the 6th-century preaching of Pope Gregory the Great, who, perhaps in error, or possibly to a particular purpose, identified Mary Magdalene with the prostitute who poured perfume on the feet of Jesus in Luke chapter 7. Even if we assume no agenda-driven intentions here, it is almost certainly the case that social and cultural conventions about gender have led to a relative inattention to this biblical Mary as a person, and to what she might suggest to us about an aspect of ministry and leadership in the Church not only in the first century but enduring to our time as well.

It is St. Thomas Aquinas who is commonly attributed as the one who solidified the tradition of referring to Mary Magdalene as "Apostle to the Apostles," though, of course, his apparent surety in using the title shows that it was likely already quite widely known in the churches of the West. In the East, some Orthodox traditions will speak of Mary as "Equal of the Apostles." These are lofty descriptors, and, as we will see, quite worthy ones at that.

I have Seen the Lord

The first place to pick up these threads is in connection with Jesus' resurrection and Mary Magdalene's role in announcing it among the disciples. Although Matthew does not name her directly and only lists a nameless group of women, Mark (Mark 16:9-11), Luke (Luke 24:10), and John's (John 20:1-2) accounts of the initial discovery of the truth of the resurrection all mention her explicitly. John's Gospel even includes a second encounter between Jesus and Mary where she mistakes him for the gardener (John 20:11-18).

I want to zero in on two lines that appear in the Lukes material. The first occurs in verse eight: "then they remembered his words" (Luke 24:8). The angelic figure has appeared to this small group of women and spoken ostensibly to Mary directly. The angel quotes Jesus' preaching to her, inviting her into a reflection on the teaching she has previously received. The critical point is that she is able to make the connections, to remember his teachings, and to join the dots between what she sees and what was there in Jesus' words but not yet fully apprehended. At that moment, Mary Magdalene takes the oral tradition that would in time become our Gospel Scriptures and extrapolates it into a message to proclaim. As she goes to tell the others, she then marshals that tradition into an exhortation to something new based on the authoritative source her hearers also know. She exercises the gift of preaching, bringing the word to bear in a new way in the light of a new reality; she is the Apostle to the Apostles.

In John there is a second appearance to Mary, in this version of the story, earlier in John 20, Peter and John look inside the empty tomb and tell the others what they saw, we are told that the others do not yet understand what has taken place. Later in the chapter, Mary Magdalene has returned to the tomb again, and this time she meets Jesus and recognizes him when he speaks her name (John 20:13-16). She goes back to the disciples again with news of this further encounter, and speaks the words "I have seen the Lord." This detail is significant because it testifies to the persistence of Mary in the face of opposition and disbelief, even among the apostles. She is not deterred by the fact that she has been written off for idle tales at least once before; she returns to share the message again. Thus we see that her preaching gift is not only one of authority, but also perseverance.

While the others will all certainly become preachers in their own right too, we might say that Mary Magdalene carries a ministry of preaching – or at least a certain kind of preaching. The fact that it is not Peter or John who are called to preach this most important sermon of all time signals the importance of leaders in the Church working in tandem and being unafraid to share elements of their ministry of leadership in a collegial fashion. Each one has their occasion to preside over the kind of ministry the Church needs in a given moment.

Came to the Tomb Bearing Spices

There is another principle to reflect on concerning Mary Magdalene and the Magdalene accent of Christian ministry and service. In this case, it is one that arises from her act of going to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. As mentioned above, in the two or three days following the death of Jesus, the twelve disciples are largely locked away in an upper room because of concern for their own lives. It falls to a small group of the women (depending on how we sort out the different names in the different Gospel accounts, as many as eight of them) among the closest disciples, with Mary Magdalene often listed prominently among them, to visit the tomb to carry out the traditional rituals of anointing the wrapped body of the deceased as a sign of respect and of God's care for them even beyond the grave (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1). This is an important detail.

Of the several names which Mary Magdalene has been given in the devotional and liturgical history of the Church, one of the others of prominence in connection with this tomb visit narrative is that of Mary as the "Holy Myrrh-bearer," named such for the aromatic spice given to Jesus by the Magi at his childhood and reappearing in his anointing for the grave.⁴⁷ To be a myrrh-bearer can be taken in a simplistic way as referring to the duty of carrying myrrh to perform a Jewish cultural ritual for Jesus. In this sense alone this is certainly already a highly honourable role and one that indicates the love, care, and devotion which the person has for the one who has been lost. It should be no surprise to us that Mary Magdalene was the one to take on this special duty.

Yet there is also ample additional symbolic meaning in this title which is there to be inferred for us in posterity. I believe it serves as a sign of a distinct pastoral gift, and of a boldness of faith that risks stepping out in faith even in the face of great fear and grief to attend selflessly to the needs of another. The pastoral care and compassion of fellow leaders in the Body of Christ being yet another gift for the ministry of the whole Church.

How do you share the Good News of Jesus' resurrection? How have you heard it proclaimed by others? Is there a particular moment of preaching that stands out for you? What does pastoral care look like in our community?

Who are our Myrrh-bearers? How can we encourage and support them?



Paul I went up to Jerusalem

It has been said that the person who has likely shaped the history of the Church of Christ more than anyone, other than the Lord Jesus himself, is the Pharisee from Tarsus who came to be known as St. Paul. Following his encounter with the risen Christ some years later than the other apostles, he would go on to plant churches all over the Mediterranean world, to write down the fruits of his theological contemplation on the meaning of the Christ event for both Jew and Gentile alike, and to contribute a significant portion of what we know as the New Testament Scriptures. While there are some parts of Paul's teaching in the context of the first century CE which contemporary Christians find difficult and have had to wrestle with in terms of their interpretation and application in a vastly different time and place, it is undeniable that the faith the Church has received continues to be indebted to the work of the Spirit of God through this complicated sinner and saint.

It is impossible to begin describing the authority and role of Paul in the early Church without also talking about Peter. Therefore, it is on this point that we make our start. It is very clear from the New Testament writings, and the books of Acts and Galatians especially, that there was a certain tension between Paul and Peter for seasons of their

lives and ministries. Of course, on one level, this makes perfect sense, with the teacher of the Law formerly known Saul in his earlier days having been directly involved in some of the first persecutions and martyrdoms of those who were found to be following in the Jesus Way. That the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem would be somewhat wary about welcoming such a person into the fold without some measure of caution seems quite reasonable.

There is, however, more to it than simply this. Paul was not called alongside the twelve disciples who we know from the Gospels, and he did not live and learn from Jesus in the same ways that the others did. Because of this, he seems to have needed to provide occasional apologetics for himself and his right to even be called an Apostle. The verses written in 1 Cor. 15:8-11, for example, suggest that perhaps his lack of relationship to the Jerusalem leadership made him illegitimate as a leader in the Church.

There was also friction between the emphasis and shape of their ministries. Peter was understood as 'Apostle to the Jews', and Paul as 'Apostle to the Gentiles' (Galatians 2:8). Paul had more of a traveling itinerant ministry, while Peter tended to be more localized in specific places.

All this background helps us to gain a better understanding of some of the direct references Paul makes to his relationship to Cephas and the so-called "Pillars" of the Church in Jerusalem – i.e., Peter, James, and John. At the end of Galatians chapter 1, Paul is speaking at some length about his personal history, his call into his ministry, and his relationship to the wider church. He uses the phrase "go up to Jerusalem" twice in chapter 1 (Gal. 1:17, 1:18), and then again at the beginning of Galatians chapter 2 (Gal. 2:1). In the first instance, Galatians 1:16-17, Paul makes a first point of indicating that his call to preach the Gospel came directly from the Lord, and that he did not immediately "go up to Jerusalem" to confer about this or be given permission for it from other leaders in the Church. He does this, it seems, to indicate that Peter and the Pillars of that church were not the be-all and end-all of the work of God and the ministry of the Church of Christ. However, in the very next verse, Galatians 1:18, he acknowledges that three years later he "did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (Peter) and stayed with him for fifteen days."

The first fact serves to emphasize Paul's distinction from Peter as a leader in his own right and with his particular call to ministry. However, the second point tells us that Paul also appreciated the importance of being in right relationship with Peter, and perhaps even expressed a measure of submission to Peter's particular area of leadership. Further confirmation of this can be seen in the initial section of Galatians 2. Paul goes on to report that again, "after fourteen years" he "went up to Jerusalem" again. This time, among other things, he entered into a time of discernment with Peter, James, and John over the Gospel he proclaimed and the way he did his ministry to ensure that he "was not running, or did not run in vain" (Gal. 2:1-2). He does this with both a measure of respect

for the authority of these fellow leaders, but also with a healthy sense of his freedom and integrity to lead the Church in the way that he has been uniquely called. The result is that The Pillars vindicate Paul from those who would question or challenge or malign his ministry. Indeed, he says that they "recognized the grace that had been given" to him, and gave him "the right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9). They did not try to control his

message or his authority, except for one small request related to remembering the poor (Gal. 2:10). Though the precise order and timeline of these events in connection with the details which are recorded about Paul's travels to Jerusalem in Acts 15 are not entirely clear, the controversies referenced in each are undoubtedly connected.

Paul and Peter have their own forms of leadership which do not 'depend' on the other per se, yet both willingly recognize that the Gospel is not served without them operating in mutual recognition and partnership together. Both can give influence and recommendation to the other, and receive it as well. Paul's ministry on the cutting edges of the Church, of breaking new ground as he adapts the articulation of the Gospel to be heard by other people and places, is served through accountability to the Peter's concern for consistency with the articulations of the faith that have come before. Peter's ministry of unity and stability remains in touch with new questions and new opportunities and is thereby invigorated and challenged to grow.

All things to All People

Paul's own descriptions of his ministry is recorded in the first letter to the early church community in the city of Corinth: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:22-23). He is describing a certain dynamism of adaptability which he displayed in the way that he engaged with different groups of people throughout the course of his ministry.

Paul spoke of himself as the Apostles to the Gentiles. While he certainly did not ignore Jewish Christians in his ministry and was very much a critical voice in navigating some of the issues involved in understanding the relationship of Jesus to first-century Judaism, this is indeed an accurate descriptor for him. That is especially so given the great degree of interaction he had with seekers of truth from various quarters of the Greco-Roman world in his time. Centres like Damascus, Antioch, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome were all places he spent time in, wrote letters to, and provided leadership to churches in. In each case, these were predominantly Gentile people to whom he was ministering. This represents a key turning point in the life of the early Church, as, already in the pages of Scripture, we can see the challenges and the impacts involved as the Jesus Movement begins to see increasing cultural diversity that takes it into conversations and communities that go beyond its initially largely Jewish roots.

What Paul is embodying here is what today we might call the task of contextual theology. To put it into a single word, he is engaging in the work of translation – helping the Gospel be expressed in the vernacular of the people and places it travels to. This is a duty which the Church has been called to every time it has been carried somewhere new. Sometimes it has done it well, and sometimes it has failed quite terribly. In the land we know today as Canada, it often failed to give space for the authentic translation of the message of Christ into a new cultural framework and idioms of the first peoples, preferring to impose European culture as a replacement. Whenever this takes place it does gross harm. Authentic translation, however, can be a beautiful thing. In Paul, we can take some hints and learn some lessons to that end. A gift of translation can be tremendously helpful in the contemporary Church, not only as it seeks to redress historic errors of imposition rather

than real translation in various parts of the world, but also as it tries to adapt to shifting cultural movements and trends that transcend specific cultures and peoples (post-secularism, consumerism, etc.).

An important part of this Pauline ministry of the Church is being able to engage in a spirit of genuine dialogue. While he does unquestionably bear witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ as something which is for others to receive, this does not need to presuppose that such others do not have their own contributions to make to the human search for God and for articulations of our various experiences of God in a great diversity of ways; they most certainly do. And when these are met in others, they are to be enjoyed and celebrated together as a bridge to understanding.

The word dialogue, of course, is comprised of two Greek terms pushed together – dia (two) and logos (word). Sometimes people who are seeking to follow Jesus have acted as if they are meant to pursue a monologue, which is one word. We have acted as if only we have things to teach, and everyone else just needs to listen and learn. This is not adequate to the Christian vocation, and whenever this results it leads to abuses and harms. Not only does it miss a great deal of the dialogical witness of the person of Jesus, but it also fails to see the critically central dialogical elements portrayed by the ministry of Paul.

How do we engage our fellow Christians who are different from us? How could we learn from the ideas and traditions of one another? How do we correct one another?

Was there a particular "translation", presentation or understanding of the life of faith in Jesus that helped you to understand it for yourself?

Who are the dialogue partners our church should seek out?