

Easter Day 2020

Half way up the Mount of Olives across the valley from the Temple Mount, the place of the divine presence, is the Russian Orthodox monastery dedicated to Mary Magdalene. It has an international community of nuns who live and worship there. It wasn't on the itinerary of the course that I attended in Jerusalem a year ago, but I visited it on my own at the end of my stay, and I was glad to be in a place where the priority was prayer and not tourism, where you could almost sense the praying presence and the devotion. All honouring the Lord, of course, but also the first person to encounter the risen Christ that first Easter Day, Mary Magdalene.

Mary had once been a deeply disturbed person. St Luke tells us that she was one of the women whom Jesus had cured of evil spirits and infirmities. She was there at the foot of the cross alongside other women who loved Jesus, including his mother. As I was reflecting on them on Friday it struck me forcibly how separated from Jesus physically they must have felt. How they would have loved to have comforted him but they were compelled to keep their social distance and watch from the sidelines, as it were. Matthew, whom we were following at the Last Hour, says that 'Many women were also there [that is at the crucifixion], looking on from a distance'. They had to watch men crucify him, men stick a spear in his side, men take him down from the cross; a man - Joseph of Arimathea - took his body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his tomb. And I thought - how Mary would have longed to have wrapped him in a clean cloth and poured oil on him. 'Then Matthew says that Joseph rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away'. Thus keeping Mary and the other women out - 'Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb'.

And then it was Sabbath and Mary could do nothing - an enforced day of rest. She must wait until the Sabbath was over and dawn was on the way the next day so that she could safely navigate her way to the tomb. But when she gets there, she finds that the stone has already been rolled away. So she runs to Simon Peter and John: 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him'. A clue there, incidentally, that I'd never noticed before as to how on earth Mary thought she was going to roll the stone away - she says 'we do not know where they have laid him.' She has, it seems, taken others with her. Can you feel the distress in her report to Peter and John? They've taken him away - whoever they is, but no doubt more men. They've taken him away.

She had come to make contact again, to touch, to be with, to pour out the oil of her love in physical, tangible form. But she could not because they had taken him away.

It is one of the heartbreaking things of this coronavirus that those who want to be with their sick or dying loved ones are kept at a distance - and that distance remains after death. Loved ones are going to their graves with just a handful of mourners who are having to keep their social distance. Perhaps there is comfort in the fact that that was what happened to Jesus and his family & friends. No great funeral or service of thanksgiving - a burial carried out by one or two men with a couple of women looking on.

In these past eight days I have had two telephone calls from women whose parent had just died. Those who had died had been significant people in my life. Last Saturday it was Linda, a woman I first came to know 30 years ago when I was a curate in North London. Linda was from the East End, a cockney, who longed to introduce me to the pleasure of jellied eels – I'm ashamed to say I always resisted. Linda joined our church and became a youth leader with me – and had a real passion for working with young people until her dying day. During my time she grew wonderfully in her Mary Magdalene-like love for Jesus and longed to serve him with all her being. She felt a call and desire to ordained ministry – but to get there she had to take a couple of A levels and do some theological distance learning. IN the end she was ordained and served amongst other places in a very deprived former mining village in Derbyshire and near here in Willingham. None of her children were with her when she died and could not be because of the lockdown.

Yesterday an hour or two before the vigil I had a call from Helen Orr, our former curate, to say that her father had died earlier in the day. Helen hadn't been able to see him in his home, but I'm glad to say was called in to be with him at his end. Her mother and sister were not there but able to join by telephone and they were able to pray, even sing together, as he passed away. Helen's father – who came to St Andrew's for a while - was Bishop Simon Barrington-Ward, who also had a great impact on my life and taught me the Jesus Prayer, that gift from the Orthodox tradition, a prayer of the desert, a prayer that has enabled many to reconnect with and love again the Jesus who can sometimes get lost to us in all our busyness and shallow sophistication. Simon was cut from a totally different cloth from Linda, educated at Eton and the son of an editor of the Times. But one thing Simon and Linda had in common was their complete and simple unaffected devotion to their Lord.

Like the sisters on the Mount of Olives, and like Mary Magdalene to whom their church is dedicated. Mary, I'm glad to say, did get her moment of contact with Jesus. It was not the one she expected. I like to think that contact involved touch, a physical moment of connection. The old translation has Jesus saying 'Do not touch me' – 'noli me tangere', but that's not what the Greek says, so the modern translations say 'do not hold on to me'. That rather suggests that there was a holding that had to come to an end. It couldn't last, but at least there was the moment.

Shortly Kathryn is going to celebrate Communion, that sacramental act in which we would normally receive in our hands, touch with our lips – a physical communion with our Lord. But today we can not. We must like the women watch at a distance – except for one and her daughter. Kathryn today is our Mary. She has got to the tomb first, she will meet with the Lord and touch while we must remain confined as the disciples were in the upper room. But perhaps all of this is helping us to experience Easter in a way that take us back to what it felt like that first Easter Day.