

MAUNDY THURSDAY 2023

CHRISM EUCHARIST

Preached in Exeter Cathedral

I have visited the Holy Land six times. On each occasion, I have learned something new and last January, when Bishop Jackie, Bishop James and I led 35 of our curates on pilgrimage, was no exception. We visited Magdala on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, not far from Tiberias. The town was destroyed by the Romans in AD70 in reprisal for the Jewish revolt and never rebuilt. Later an Arab town was built, but further inland with the result that recently archaeologists have discovered an entire first century Jewish settlement lying undisturbed, just below the surface.

Four years ago, when I was last in the Holy Land, Magdala was still being excavated. Now the site is open to the public, and you can explore its streets including the ruins of the synagogue of which, St Mark tells us, Jairus was the president. According to Mark, it was while Jesus was en route to Jairus's home to see his sick daughter that a woman, who had suffered from haemorrhages for twelve years, reached out in the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus's garment and was cured.

On the shore of the lake, where tradition has it Jesus called his first disciples as they mended their nets, a new church has been built. When you enter it, you find yourself in a domed atrium, supported by eight polished red marble columns on each of which is carved in gold letters the name of one of the women who supported Jesus's ministry.

As you would expect, there is a pillar inscribed with the name of Mary Magdalen, Mary of Magdala. But also commemorated are Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha, Mary, the wife of Clopas, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome who brought spices to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus; Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza; and Susanna, all of whom Luke tells us provided for Jesus and the Twelve 'out of their own resources' (Luke 8.3).

The eighth pillar is blank and the invitation is mentally to write the name of a person who has supported you in your journey through life. I think that the

atrium is a simple but powerful witness to the ministry of these female pillars of God's church. Standing there, it gave me reason to thank God for the ministry of women in today's Church and for all those, men as well as women, who down the years have resourced my ministry with their kindness and generosity.

Today we come to the cathedral to renew our ministerial promises. Preoccupied with the challenges of ministry, and there are plenty at the moment, it is all too easy to take for granted the unsung heroes in our families and friends and communities who encourage and journey with us. Perhaps in our prayers today we might thank God for their ministry to us.

But let me return to Magdala.

When you move from the atrium into the church proper, you are greeted by a spectacular view of the Sea of Galilee. The altar is made in the shape of a first century fishing boat. It is cleverly designed because, as you stand there, it looks as though the altar is actually floating on the lake behind it. On the walls on either side of the chapel is a series of life-size icons of the twelve apostles. They are positioned almost at eye level so you can study their expressions and they are of outstanding quality. There they all are: the fishermen Simon Peter, Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip, Bartholomew, Simon the Zealot and, to my surprise, Judas Iscariot.

I don't think I have ever encountered an icon of Judas Iscariot before. But there he is among the Twelve as he must have been in Magdala when Jesus was en route to Jairus's house. Judas is represented holding in his hand a bag of money— not the bribe he later took from the chief priests in Jerusalem to betray Jesus and which we commemorate tonight in our services. But rather the purse containing the common fund of which he was treasurer and out of which the disciples bought food and the necessities of daily life to support the ministry of Jesus, much in the way parishes contribute to our diocesan common fund out of which we pay the clergy stipends. You will remember that the evangelists tell us that Judas was a thief and was wont to help himself to the money on the quiet.

The faces of the twelve apostles all face the altar, their eyes looking out at the lake, looking symbolically to Jesus. Except the eyes of Judas look down. Gazing at his face, I had a flashback to my theology finals. I remember turning over Systematic Theology Paper One and reading the

first question: 'Expound the doctrine of providence in relation to the career of Judas Iscariot.' As I sat in the examination hall, I decided to give that one a miss. I still find the figure of Judas both disturbing and haunting.

When I was a vicar, a reporter from *The Sunday Times* came to interview the children in our Sunday School about their beliefs. She asked them loads of questions: What happened on Christmas Day? What happened on Palm Sunday? What happened on Good Friday? What happened on Easter Day? She got a variety of responses, most of which were vaguely orthodox, much to my relief. But then she asked the children a left-field question: What happened between Good Friday and Easter Day? What happened on Holy Saturday?

It was question worthy of Systematic Theology Paper One and it was met with stunned silence. Finally, one 8yr old girl put up her hand and said, 'Had Jesus gone to look for his friend Judas?' Perhaps he had. We'll find out one day.

I have one other experience to share with you and that relates to the crypt chapel. Climb down the stairs and you find yourself in one of the cobbled streets of first century Magdala. We can be almost certain that Jesus will have walked that street and instinctively some of our number took off their socks and shoes and walked barefoot on the stone cobbles while they said their prayers.

But it was not the cobblestones that arrested my attention; it was the painting on the wall behind the altar. It was about a metre and a half high and two metres across. It was of feet – or to be more precise, the bottom of people's legs in the crowd around Jesus. In the centre of the painting were the sandaled feet of Jesus, the white tassels of his rabbi's robe just visible. Around him were pairs of dirty, calloused, bruised feet; feet with torn nails, feet with worn out or broken sandals. Feet. Feet. Feet. But through their legs stretched a woman's hand, thin and frail, reaching out to touch the hem of Jesus's garment.

The painting captured both the vulnerability of the woman, but also her determination, her faith, her grit. She was probably not unlike the 'woman of the city' who in today's gospel (Luke 7:36-50) also reached out to Jesus for healing and found herself weeping at his feet, wiping them with her hair and anointing them with oil. Simon the Pharisee was offended not simply

by the woman's presence and behaviour, but by Jesus's tolerance of her. Surely Jesus should rebuke her and get rid of her? The disciples at Magdala, bustling around Jesus, were similarly contemptuous of the woman with the haemorrhage when she reached out to Jesus.

Time and again in the gospels we see Jesus confounding not only his critics but his own disciples because he systematically replaced the politics of ritual purity with the politics of compassion. And Jesus invites us to go on the same journey with him. We need to allow Jesus to reshape our inner world and our attitude to others people.

Shortly before he died, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney said, 'The biggest change in my lifetime has been the evaporation of the transcendent from public discourse.' The loss of the transcendent. Our generation has become so enmeshed in transactional language that we have difficulty in speaking about the ultimate and mysterious dimensions of life that speak of God. Our culture has forsaken the language of grace.

We have also lost the language of forgiveness. Whilst practically everything is permitted in Britain today, practically nothing is forgiven. Our society is heavy with accusation. The world these days is divided into victims and perpetrators. A single mistake, a moment of madness, will stay on the record forever. Social media forgets nothing. We are tainted by any association with the wrongdoing of our ancestors. Statues are torn down; schools and buildings and roads are renamed. Former heroes are trashed as villains.

Holiness is being redefined as the untainted and uncontaminated. Jesus may have replaced the politics of ritual purity with the politics of compassion, but we are busy going in the reverse direction. Increasingly, we find ourselves trapped in a purity spiral, with people working harder and harder to disassociate themselves from the impure, those who are different from us, those who think differently from us. But this is not the way of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus said to Simon the Pharisee about the woman weeping at his feet, 'I tell you Simon, her many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little, loves little.' Forgiveness and love are linked. When we withhold forgiveness, it hardens our heart. Compassion softens the heart, and it is the work of grace.

The church in Magdala has an unusual Latin dedication. It is called *Duc in altum*, meaning 'Push out into the deep'. They were the words of Jesus to Simon Peter and the other fishermen who had slaved all night and caught nothing. And yet, at Jesus's behest, let down their nets one more time and made the catch of a lifetime. 'Push out into the deep' (Luke 5.4).

Richard Foster in his book *Celebration of Discipline* says that 'superficiality is the curse of our age'. In his view, what our generation needs is not more intelligent people or more gifted people, but 'deep people'. Compassion. Forgiveness. Kindness. Love. Healing. We don't discover these things in the shallow end of life. Push out into the deep.

This Easter let's obey Christ's call and not only will we be transformed, but the Church will be flooded with grace.

+ Robert Exon