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Throughout the centuries, Mary Magdalene was wrongly portrayed as a reformed prostitute as she was confused with the woman with the alabaster jar described in Luke 7:36-50. The woman with the alabaster jar is called a “sinner”, but not a prostitute; Luke uses a different word when he describes an actual prostitute in 15:30. Why it matters so much as to whether or not she was a prostitute is unclear. Surely the point would be that if she had sinned (which all humans do) then Jesus would have forgiven her? Indeed from Luke 8:1-3 we know that Mary Magdalene generously supported the material needs of Jesus and the apostles. Luke’s initial passage also states that she was possessed by seven demons. Though the text never describes what happened to her to be cured, Mark 16:9 specifies that Jesus was the one who exorcised her demons. We don’t know the exact specifics of her illness, but we can surmise that being cured of this would make most people extremely grateful to their healer and may explain why she became such a devout follower and supporter of Jesus.

DEVOTION TO JESUS

Biblical accounts also affirm that Mary Magdalene was one of the women who stayed with Jesus at the foot of the cross on the day he was crucified and died. Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40 and John 19:25 explicitly mention her being at Calvary with Jesus’ mother and some other women. Tradition has it that the other men (only John the apostle is recorded as being there) and apostles abandoned Jesus and left him as it was too dangerous for them to be there, while

women such as Mary Magdalene remained faithful and stayed with him. Her act of solidarity illustrates her love and devotion to Jesus.

Her most significant role in the gospels however is her role as the first one to discover the empty tomb on Easter morning. Mary Magdalene leads the women who come to the tomb (John whittles down the group to Mary Magdalene alone). Seeing that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb and not understanding what has happened, she immediately assumes that “they” have stolen the body of Jesus. She recognises Jesus when he speaks her name, echoing John 10:3 in which Jesus’ sheep know the sounds of his voice. After this emotional reunion, Jesus sends Mary to the apostles (or disciples) to bring the good news. She tells them “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18). Because she was sent by Jesus to bring the message that Christ is risen, she is often metaphorically called the “apostle to the Apostles”.

A WITNESS

The idea of women as primary witnesses does not seem unusual to people now, but it was a revolutionary concept at the time. The testimony of women was not given the same weight as men’s, either personally or in a court of law. When the Christian stories described Mary Magdalene and the other women as the first witnesses of the Resurrection, they were saying something important about the nature of women. They bear witness to his teaching and healing, to his torture and death, to his victory over death. He stands before them, as he does us at Easter, with his body transformed and gives them the mission to tell the world what they have seen. ■

**Today’s readings****Ws 12:13.16-19****Rm 8:26-27****Mt 13:24-43**

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven are both about the unexpected power hidden in small things. A mustard seed looks small and insignificant but when it takes root, it becomes a shrub or even a tree. In the same way, a woman baking bread adds a lump of leaven to her flour to produce a larger quantity of dough than she had to begin with. Jesus’ preaching in the countryside of Galilee, like the mustard seed and the leaven, will soon reach out to the whole world and transform it.

Today’s Gospel also contains the parable of the weed sown among the wheat. Matthew’s explanation looks beyond the time of Jesus to the life of the community after the resurrection. The goodwill and the enthusiasm of the first disciples will not last. By Matthew’s time, the Church probably contained a good number of people whose lives and conduct did not give much edification. But what was to be done about it? Some members probably wanted an instant clean-up campaign but the wiser might not have wanted hasty action to be taken.

The question of reward and punishment should be left to the end times. Human beings, even Church leaders, need to recognise the fact that the Church will always have both saints and sinners.

GOD’S WORD TODAY

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When writing about Mary of Magdala (a town on the western side of the Sea of Galilee), it is always unfortunately necessary to spend some time unpicking what myths surround her. She is one of the most famous, and indeed mysterious female characters in the Bible. A woman who lived and served in close proximity to Jesus.

