



Blessed Be

April 2016

Welcome back to the Grail's spirituality publication. In it, we hope you'll find something for your contemplation, ideas to think about, prayers to use and possibilities for further reading. The items in it are contributed by various people and reflect the Grail's Christian foundation as well as its openness to the spirituality and ideas of other faith traditions. The next publication will be around September, and if you have anything that you wish to contribute, we would welcome your input, so please contact us at helenmacauley@gmail.com.

We begin this edition with a piece submitted by Alison Healey written in 1913 by 'the Bard of Bengal', Nobel prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore:

GITANJALI (SONG OFFERINGS)

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic steps.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

You came down from your throne and stood at my cottage door.

I was singing all alone in a corner and the melody caught your ear. You came down and stood at my cottage door.

Masters are many in your hall and songs are sung there at all hours.

But the simple carol of this novice struck at your love.

One plaintive little strain mingled with the great music of the world and, with a flower for a prize, you came down and stopped at my cottage door.

(Translated into English by the author)

*I, Helen Macauley, have been looking at the **BHAGAVAD GITA** and came across these verses I'd like to share with you:*

I am seated in the hearts of all living entities. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings. 10:20

One who is not envious but is a kind friend to all living entities, who does not think himself a proprietor and is free from false ego, who is equal in both happiness and distress, who is tolerant, always satisfied, self-controlled, and engaged in devotional service with determination, his mind and intelligence fixed on Me – such a devotee of Mine is very dear to Me. 12:14

Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not despair. 18:66.

From Anne Day we have a reflection on the other Mary written by Good Samaritan Sister, Patty Fawcner, who is an adult educator, writer and facilitator. Patty has an abiding interest in justice and spirituality. Her formal qualifications are in arts, education, theology and spirituality.

MARY MAGDALENE: FRIEND, ICON, MODEL

I thank my father for my friendship with Mary Magdalene. I was a young woman when, after a brief illness, my father died of cancer. It was the first time I'd lost a loved one. I was devastated. My gnawing grief for my darling Dad made me interpret well-meaning words of sympathy as hollow pious platitudes. God seemed nowhere to be found. I felt nothing of God's comfort. Unbelievably naïve, I had expected God to shield me from normal human grief because I was a person of faith – I was a nun for heaven's sake!

Many months after Dad's death I went on a weekend retreat and the wise old monk who guided me suggested I read Chapter 20 of John's Gospel and spend time with Mary Magdalene in the garden on the morning of Jesus' resurrection.

The story is well-known and well-loved. A grieving Mary goes to the tomb. The body of Jesus is not there. Still weeping, she encounters a mysterious figure whom she mistakes for the gardener. He calls her by name. She re-discovers her Beloved. He tells her not to cling onto him but to go and tell the good news of his resurrection to his disciples. 'I have seen the Lord', she rejoices.

Something shifted in me as I spent time with Mary. Somehow, inchoately, I felt God calling *me* by name. Somehow God was present in my emptiness. Like Mary, I couldn't cling onto a former idea of God. I had to, in Anthony de Mello's words, 'empty out my teacup God'. I had to find a new, more adult image of God. Instead of a Mr Fix-it God who did not honour my grieving humanity, I found a more mysterious God, a presence in emptiness, a bright darkness, a God who grieved *with* me. I was grateful to Mary Magdalene but still didn't really know her.

Years earlier, I had seen Cecil B. DeMille's movie, *The King of Kings*, where Mary Magdalene first appears as a bejewelled, breast-plated courtesan driving a chariot drawn by – what else – five plumed zebras! She is hurrying to meet her lover, Judas Iscariot, who she hears has become 'distracted' by some carpenter turned preacher. I laughed at Cecil B. DeMille's fertile imagination but still accepted uncritically the Christian tradition's stereotype of Mary as the infamous scarlet woman who turned her life around upon meeting Jesus.

Scripture study over the years has led me to discover who Mary Magdalene is and who she is not. The more the real Mary Magdalene is allowed to 'stand up', the more significance she has for me, not only as a friend, but also as an icon of what women's role in the Church is and could be.. Scripture scholars agree that there is not a shred of evidence that Mary was a prostitute. There are at least six or seven different Marys in the Scriptures and they get marvellously muddled.

Each Gospel writer portrays Mary Magdalene as the first witness to the resurrection and the first to announce this publicly. The definition of an apostle is one who has encountered the risen Lord and proclaims that Good News. In the earliest Christian tradition, Mary is therefore rightly celebrated, not as prostitute but as 'Apostle to the Apostles'..

Mary was chosen for this special role because, I believe, she stood with Jesus in his suffering. Unlike the male disciples who, apart from the Beloved Disciple, fled or drew a weapon in the garden or denied Jesus, Mary endured the brutal horror of Jesus' crucifixion. She does not flee. She does not fight. She does not flinch. Like so many women after her, she gives practical expression to her faith in Jesus. She sits opposite the tomb till dark and then early the next morning comes to the tomb with spices to anoint the body.

We know that female community leaders and spiritual guides were not uncommon in the early Church. But as soon as the Christian community became part of the establishment, women became more marginalised. Patriarchy minimalised them. Within a few centuries, Mary the 'Apostle to the Apostles' was forgotten and Mary the former prostitute became entrenched in official Church teaching and in popular imagination.

As Mary Magdalene's star waned, the other Mary, Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, shone. The two Marys demonstrate the Church's tendency to either put women on a pedestal or relegate them and discount the legacy of their spiritual leadership. Mary of Nazareth is firmly on the pedestal. Dressed in virginal blue, she retains her spirituality but is stripped of her sexuality. Mary of Magdala, the relegated one, retains her sexuality but has been stripped of her spiritual influence. Her name, Magdalene, continues to be mythically associated with female sinfulness. She continues to be ignored as 'Apostle to the Apostles'..

The institutional Church has an abject record of recognising women's spiritual leadership. In the Catholic liturgical calendar there are about 200 feast days for holy men and women, and only one in five are women; and a quarter of that 20% belong to Mary, the mother of God. The greater majority of the remaining women are either virgins or religious – hardly the profile of the majority of women in the Church.

We have yet to balance spirituality and sexuality in the Church especially in regard to women. Women's leadership and spiritual influence will be compromised until we do. Pope John Paul II loved putting women on a pedestal. He spoke often about women's 'feminine genius' but preferred that they remain in the private sphere of kitchen or cloister.

However, there are positive signs with Pope Francis, who said in an address for International Women's Day, that 'a world where women are marginalised is a sterile world'. "Women have the capacity to see otherwise", he said. They 'ask questions that men never think of.' Of course they do! Their experience is different. Their perspectives and insights are different. Women have tended to start from their own experience of God, rather than theory about God. This is what Mary Magdalene does. 'I have seen the Lord', she says, and tells the other disciples what her Beloved said to her.

Repeatedly Pope Francis has said that the Church needs women's wisdom and contribution in all spheres of Church life including decision-making. The critical issue, however, is how to break the nexus between decision-making and ordination. Pope Francis acknowledged this in his first major document *Evangelii Gaudium*, but worryingly, has not as yet made any significant structural moves to rectify the situation.

For me, Mary Magdalene represents all the unrecognised but spiritually significant women and men in the Church. She invites me to enter Jesus' suffering and not shirk. She calls me to encounter the Risen One in my prayer. She challenges me to be a Good News person who proclaims fiercely and boldly not herself, but the One whom she has seen, the One who sends her. She has much to teach us about God's inclusive, incredible love for the relegated, the disparaged and dispossessed

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Betty Pike is an Aboriginal woman, living in Victoria. She is a published poet and writer who integrates Aboriginal and Catholic spirituality in her own being and gives expression to this in her life and in her writing. She invites us to make this covenant with the land of Australia. This last contribution was sent also by Alison Healey.

COVENANT WITH THE LAND

Today, we make a covenant with this land.
As a branch is grafted onto a mature stock,
So we want to be grafted onto the ancient heritage of this land,
So that its life may flow through us.

We commit ourselves to the land and resources of this earth and to all who belong to it,
Most particularly the indigenous people, those who cherish their ancestral home.
And also the migrants, refugees and immigrants
Who have bound themselves to the land.
We will care for it with gentleness, patience, simplicity and compassion,
Rather than something merely to be bought and sold.
We will see the land as a gift for which we are truly thankful,
And undertake the privileged duty of respecting and looking after it.

We thank God, the Great Creator, for all that the earth provides:
Water, food, and all the riches above and below the ground.

We undertake to use them sparingly and thoughtfully,
And to work in solidarity with those who are victims of exploitative industries
To restore justice to the people and establish good stewardship of the land and its resources.

As we enter more deeply into the Spirit of the land,
We see the land as a Sacrament and Icon of our mothering Creator.
Be still.

May our governments and companies learn to listen to the breath of the Spirit, which has blown
through the land for ages past,
Today and always;
For this is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Trinity, the Spirit of Vision, Justice, Dreaming.

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