

Saint Mary Magdalene, Apostle to the Apostles *Observed 22 July*

Mary of Magdala is one of the most popular saints of the Church. In the Gospels she was first a follower of Jesus, primary among that band who followed him throughout his ministry, and from whom Jesus is said to have driven seven demons. She was among the few brave enough to remain at the foot of the Cross, to witness Jesus' final agony. She was also brave enough to go to the tomb, to face some of the same soldiers who killed Jesus in order to anoint his broken body and there was the first to see the Resurrected Jesus and to spread the word - so that she alone has the title 'Apostle to the Apostles'. These facts would seem to be enough to assure her a prominent place in Christian devotion, but the common tendency to conflate biblical narratives has added other elements. She has frequently been identified with the unnamed woman "who sinned much" and who anointed Jesus with costly ointment, washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. This scene is so vivid and evocative that it cried out to be attached to a name and a story. And so the woman from Magdala became the prototype of the repentant prostitute. And the Alabastron (the alabaster vessel of costly ointment) has become one of her most prominent symbols, representing both anointing Jesus in awe and gratitude while he was alive, and anointing him in reverence and grief after his death. The Magdalen has also figured prominently in the various film reflections on the life of Jesus. In the rock opera, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* she is the most visible and articulate disciple, struggling to come to terms with this puzzling man she has come to follow. In Martin Scorsese's controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* (based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel) Mary is a very beautiful woman, driven to prostitution when Jesus turned from their childhood love to follow the call of God. She is prominent in the entire story, struggling as he struggles in the early scenes, and following him faithfully once he finds his ministry. But most important she is there at the crucifixion, as always, and is used by the devil for that final temptation, trying to lure Jesus down from the cross, away from his identity as Messiah into the comfort of an ordinary human life. This is one of many examples of her being brought into fiction and speculation as people seek to better understand Jesus' meaning and ministry.

The Magdalen is a primary symbol of the forgiveness and invitation to new life which Jesus offers, and of the challenge this represents to the onlookers who have always been much more ready to judge than to forgive. Whether we think of her as the one whose sanity and ability to function were so utterly compromised by seven demons, or as the one whose devotion leads to

the extravagant expenditure of costly ointment for Jesus' comfort rather than relieving the poor, or as the prostitute, we find the Magdalen surrounded by people who see her in terms of her history and are ready to reject her, while Jesus seems to look to her heart and her future. It is as if within his gaze she is surrounded by his light and exists only in that loving possibility, sullied by none of the grayness of her past. Jesus draws her into new life without hesitation, and she accepts this new life, without regard for the skepticism of anyone else.

Lessons Judith 9:1,11-14; Psalm 42:1-7; II Corinthians 5:14-18; John 20:11-18

Collect Almighty God, whose blessed Son restored Mary Magdalene to health of body and of mind, and called her to be a witness of his resurrection: Mercifully grant that by your grace we may be healed from all our infirmities and know you in the power of his unending life; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and for ever. Amen.