

What a great day for a festival. - the Festival of Mary Magdalene. So, can I ask you festival goers "Are you having a great time?!!"

Well as you know for years - even centuries - most women in society and the church did not have a great time. They were subjected to submission and the status of second class citizens by men. The church was very good at keeping women submissive to it's all male hierarchy.

Today we have a great opportunity to celebrate a champion of women and women's women ministry - Mary Magdalene. But before we think more about Mary Magdalen, please allow me to reminisce for a few moments.

What an amazing summer we are having. It brings back memories of 1976. That was the year when serious discussions were beginning about the ordination of women to the priesthood. It was not until 1986 that the first women were ordained deacon in the C of E and not until 1994 that the first female priest was ordained.

How the landscape has changed! 50 years ago when I was a curate in Poplar the banner for women's ministry was carried by the wonderful nursing sisters of St John the Divine. They may be more familiar to you as the sisters of Nonnatus House in the BBC series "Call the Midwife". They were the only women in a large male clergy team. In fact in the Diocese of London at the time which had over 600 clergy, there was not one woman cleric.

Last week I went to a funeral in Molesey at the other end of our diocese. It was conducted by the vicar assisted by the previous vicar

together with two other priests. - all of whom were female. In this deanery of Farnham there must now be as many if not more women clergy than men. Many of our parishes have women incumbents. Two Farnham women clergy have recently gone on to be archdeacons. We have a female Bishop of Dorking and the huge Diocese of London is presided over by Bishop Sarah Mullally.

This blossoming of women's ministry links directly with the woman we are celebrating today - Mary Magdalene, a close follower of Jesus who was a witness of his crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

However, for years the church depicted Mary Magdalene as the sinful woman that we read of in St Luke, chapter 7. This was the woman who wet Jesus's feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair and then anointed them with costly ointment. Jesus forgave her with the words "Her sins which are many are forgiven for she loved much". It's a wonderful story of the salvation of a fallen woman who finds peace.

This picture of Mary Magdalene as a fallen licentious, sexualised woman has persisted for centuries in great art, in novels like the Da Vinci Code even in musicals such as Jesus Christ Superstar. This image of Mary as a close female follower of Jesus suited the church very well.

However, for the last 50 years or so the majority of biblical scholars have said that this woman that we read about in Luke chapter 7 is not Mary Magdalen.

So why did the church for centuries declare that Mary Magdalen was the same person as the fallen woman of Luke chapter 7?

Why was it that this woman Mary Magdalen was thought by the Church to be the same person as the sinful woman - the prostitute?

Could it be that it suited a male dominated church to undermine the role of women in the church? Could it be that it suited the church to see Mary Magdalen as a fallen woman?

Could it be that this woman, a close follower of Jesus, a witness to his death and the first to meet Jesus after his resurrection was a threat?

The church for centuries has been a male hierarchy. Bishops, Popes, priests and deacons have all been male and yet here was a woman in all but name an apostle. An apostle - close to Jesus, a witness to his crucifixion and resurrection and yet for centuries the church said there was no way that she could be recognised as an apostle let alone a model of women's ministry. And so, for centuries Mary Magdalen was marginalised as an apostle, seen as a fallen woman, a prostitute. You could I believe even say that this mistaken image of Mary was used by the church to keep the door shut - even firmly bolted - to prevent women taking their rightful place in the ministry of the church.

In recent years biblical scholars have identified Mary Magdalen not as the fallen woman in Luke chapter 7 but as the healed woman in Chapter 8. Scholars now see her as a healed and restored woman, describing her as a strong independent woman who supported Jesus financially and spiritually. Some see her as hugely significant as a mentor to the apostles in the days following Jesus's death and resurrection, even describing her as "Apostle to the Apostles".

Well thank God times have changed. In 1969 the Roman Catholic Church rolled back centuries of wrongly labelling Mary Magdalen, stating that she was a distinct person from the sinful woman mentioned in the Gospel of Luke 7.

And in 2016 Pope Francis declared a major Feast Day in her honour on 22nd July. This means that this woman who first proclaimed

Jesus's resurrection has been put on absolute equality with the other apostles. One Vatican commentator has said "This decision marks a huge point of no return for women's ministry" – we shall just have to wait and see.

We can be justly proud that in the Church of England the doors have been flung open to the ministry of women – thanks largely I believe to a reappraisal of Mary Magdalen.

So what can we take with us from this feast day of Mary Magdalen? Mary Magdalene illustrates to us that the church has been and can still be very good at using traditions even apostles that suppress those things which challenge the status quo.

Secondly, Mary Magdalen was a persistent sincere and enthusiastic follower of Jesus. Which leaves the question. Are we?

Thirdly Mary's persistence and sincerity was rewarded. We learn from the Gospel that Mary was weeping outside the tomb looking for the body of Jesus so that she could take it for burial. She was devastated but she was there. Suddenly Jesus appears but Mary does not recognise Jesus and thinks it is the gardener. "Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away". Jesus said to her "Mary". Mary knew it was Jesus because he called her by name.

We too have a unique name -the name we received at our baptism. If we too are persistent and sincere, if we give ourselves space, allow ourselves to be silent, we too can be assured that in some mysterious way God will speak to us and call us by our name.

Please God that we will have the grace to respond to that amazing apostle that we remember and celebrate today Mary Magdalene.