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St. Mary Magdalene

The following is a sermon for the Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene by the Rev'd Dr. Robert Crouse. Father Crouse is a retired Professor of Classics, and currently the Canon Theologian of the Diocese of Saskatchewan.

Peter4:8

Today the Church keeps the Festival of St Mary Magdalene, and the Scripture lessons appointed for today's services all have to do with her place as a witness to Jesus' Resurrection. And she witnesses to his Resurrection, not just because she was present at the empty tomb on Easter morning, and met the Risen Christ in the garden, but also surely, because she was one whose life was made new in Jesus Christ. By her conversion of life, she witnesses to the Resurrection, and pro-claims new life to all who follow Jesus. "Go and tell my brethren," he bids her.

We know very little with accuracy about St. Mary Magdalene; but, in general, she is the example of a notable sinner who became a great saint. Just what her earlier life had been, we do not know precisely. St Luke remarks that seven demons had gone out of her. Probably she is to be identified with that sinful woman who crashed the Pharisee's banquet with an alabaster box of ointment and anointed Jesus' feet, and received forgiveness of sins. "I tell you," says Jesus, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." "Charity shall cover the multitude of sins."

St. Mary Magdalene is a witness to the triumph of love. But what is this love, which winds new life, this charity which covers the multitude of sins? We can hardly mention the word "Charity" without recalling St. Paul's great hymn of charity in the 13th Chapter of I Corinthians, one of the best known and most loved passages of scripture.

In Chapter 12 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, from which today's Epistle comes, St. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about spiritual gifts - gifts of wisdom, of knowledge, of faith, of healing, of prophecy, of miracle-working, of administration, and so on. All these gifts are desirable, he says; but he will show us "a still more excellent way" - the way of charity, without which all those gifts are worthless.

Obviously, we use the word "charity" in a much narrower sense than St. Paul has in mind. For us, it usually means gifts to the

poor, or contributions to tax-exempt organizations, or perhaps a generous attitude towards somebody's foibles. Modern versions of the scriptures generally translate the word as "love"; but it is doubtful whether that really goes very far towards clarifying the meaning of the passage. If the meaning of "Charity" has become too narrow, the meaning of "love" has become too broad: so broad as to include even our attitude towards our favourite breakfast cereal.

We use the word "love" to refer mostly to feelings and sentiments, to natural affections and preferences, and that is not really what St. Paul is talking about at all. He is talking about a condition of reason and will, focused upon the eternal good, that is, upon God - a reason and will focused upon God, and in that perspective attending to the eternal good of one another. This is not principally a matter of affections, of sentiments, - it is a matter of perceiving clearly and steadfastly willing the eternal good.

Our natural affections and preferences are not charity, though they may sometimes be its accoutrements. Sometimes they help and support charity, and that is a happy circumstance. But sometimes they obstruct and distort it; and sometimes charity requires that our affections and desires be crucified; because, far from seeking the eternal good, they are subjective and self-seeking. "Charity seeketh not her own."

Even in the resurrection garden, Mary Magdalene is tempted to cling to the earthly body of Jesus. "Touch me not," he tells her, "do not cling to me." "For I am not yet ascended to my Father." True charity is to know and will the eternal good, to see beyond this or that particular earthly thing.

Without charity, says St. Paul, all our gifts are worthless - sounding brass and tinkling cymbal - noisy nonsense - a cacophony of lifeless things, worthless: and it does not matter how much we know, or what wonderful and heroic things we do. Worthless, because none of these gifts is finally of any use, if we miss the end of all knowing and doing, the eternal good.

It is charity - the will perfected in its focus upon the good - which holds all things together towards that end: "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." Without that end, all things fall apart into a meaningless chaos, a mere series of episodes.

All our knowings and doings are parts: "We know in part, and we prophesy in part." But the parts make no sense without the pattern of the whole. They are like the pieces in a jigsaw puzzle - useless and ridiculous except for their place in the whole puzzle.

"When I was a child, I spake as a child." - I babbled; "I understood and thought as a child" But when I became a man," says St. Paul, "I put away my childish things." It is the essence of childishness to hold to a part, a fragment, as though it were the whole. In childhood, the immediate, the particular object or objective is the whole world. To possess this or that, to taste this or that, to touch this or that, seems

infinitely desirable, an end in itself.

To grow up is to see these things in perspective, to relate them to a perfection which is beyond this moment. "Do not cling to me." "Touch me not", says Jesus to Mary, "For I am not yet ascended to my Father." She would cling childishly to his particular earthly form - He would have her espouse the absolute, eternal good which is God.

Charity is not gushing sentiment, nor is it indiscriminate affection or generosity. Charity requires rather the clearest possible discernment and discrimination of the good in every situation, and the most steadfast will in pursuing that good. Beyond faith and hope, charity is the ultimate mark of the maturity of the saint.

No doubt we are still children. "We know in part, and we prophesy in part." Our discernment is feeble; we see "through a glass darkly" - vague and shadowy images of the good. We must pray and work for clearer vision and more steadfast will, that the new life of Jesus' Resurrection may be perfected in us, that we with Mary, may be witnesses of that resurrection.

Mary Magdalene, in the Resurrection garden, through the midst of her tears, mistook Jesus for the gardener. But he is, after all, the gardener, who will cultivate in our barren soil the gifts and graces of his kingdom, and raise in us that best gift of "charity which shall cover the multitude of sins". And then we shall see him as he is, and know even as we are known.

"It will be said on that day, 'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord, We have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation' ."

Amen

Rev'd Dr. Robert Crouse

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