



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for S Mary Magdalene (22nd July) 2021

Saint Mary Magdalene was an early victim of trolling - not, in her case, across the airwaves of the internet, but through the medium of the academic network, which criss-crossed Christendom.

The process began late into the sixth century when Pope Gregory the Great, during a series of Easter sermons, conflated her with other characters in the Gospels. The portrayal gained traction and for the next nearly fourteen hundred years, a shadow was cast over Mary Magdalene's reputation, which has only been lifted in recent decades: and actually many of us still remember the old story even if we know that it was incorrect.

Of course, she had long left this world by the time that the rumours began to circulate, as it were: beyond the reach of any harm they might have inflicted on a living person; and in any case, you cannot libel the dead. So, we might ask, what harm was done?

The answer to that, I suspect, lies not so much in any detriment inflicted on her - though most of us, while alive, would prefer to think that we will be remembered positively - but on the impact it has made on others down the generations.

Besmirching the characters of others plays to a quite deep-seated appetite in human beings to believe the worst of them. Here, a taste for the salacious runs along aside or combines with a sense that the more negatively we can paint others, either the better we shall appear or, at least, the less egregious our faults shall be - not least to ourselves.

However, the problem with all of this is that it can create disillusion and cynicism to a degree not warranted by the reality. People are frequently not as bad as they are painted. We can, for example, be very quick to impute malevolent motivations to decisions and choices with which we disagree without a firm grasp of the context in which the conclusion was reached.

This is not to say that we should set out to be naifs about others. We have a duty to be vigilant and to protect ourselves and, even more, some others from the malign intentions that some may harbour. Furthermore, we should not waste resources putting our trust in people we know will not honour misplaced confidence.

At the same time, we should eschew the temptation always to be looking for the worst in people - particularly those with whom we may disagree. After all, Christian discipleship is all about identifying God's good in the world, not revelling in its hindrance.

After all, we do not wish to promote a vision of human society, which is irredeemably venal, still less suggest that such a world would give us pleasure. Not least, because in such an environment, people will assume the same of us as - to the detriment of our discipleship.

Who can say why Gregory the Great promulgated his proposition about Mary Magdalene? Surely he could not have intended to unleash the preposterous claims, which have subsequently rested on his words. However, he should have been more careful.

Cardinal Wolsey once cautioned Thomas More to be careful what idea he put in the King's mind, for once it lodged there, he would never pull it out. The same is true of the world at large; and once we have despoiled somebody's reputation, we cannot know where it will lead.