

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

'Who are you looking for? Mary Magdalene and Worship'

July 22nd 2018

John 20.1-2, 11-18

[People's lives may seem quite good and satisfying without consciously having God in them, but they could be so much better if he *is* there; it's like the difference between a drink of lemon squash by itself, which is good and refreshing enough, and one into which you've put a slice of fresh lemon – which totally transforms the experience: it's the taste of the *source* of all lemony-ness infusing itself into our common or garden experience of a lemon drink.]

Over the next few summer Sundays, Nicola and I are planning to talk about worship. Last week, at the 10 am service, Nicola shared with us her experience of worship in Rwanda, and specifically how it always starts and continues with *praise*, however difficult people's circumstances.

Today, on St Mary Magdalene's day, when we've heard what's possibly my favourite passage in the Bible – the one about Mary weeping outside Jesus' tomb, and what happened next – I want to think with you about what we come to worship *looking for*.

Very early in St John's Gospel we find the story of the disciples of John the Baptist who had Jesus pointed out to them as 'the Lamb of God', and tagged along behind him to see what more they could learn. And we're told that Jesus, knowing that they were following, turned around

and asked '*What are you looking for?*' These are the first words we hear Jesus speaking in St John's Gospel. And because John is the mystical Gospel – the one in which everything has layers of meaning – we know that this isn't just a casual question addressed one afternoon to a group of rather awkward and curious young men: it's a question addressed to each of us and to all of us throughout the ages, as we follow along behind Jesus.: 'What are you looking for?'

Now, in today's reading, with, as the meaning and purpose of Jesus' earthly life is unveiled in the resurrection, we hear almost the same question addressed to Mary Magdalene; '*Who are you looking for?*' We know full well who she's looking for – Jesus himself, or rather – his corpse – but again, it's not just a question for her: it's a question for each and all of us: '*Who are you looking for?*' (Or, to put it in correct literary English, as our Bible translation does, '*For whom are you looking?*') The 'What?' of the beginning of the Gospel has become a 'Whom?'. The experience of following Jesus over several years has moved his disciples on: they may have begun their journey with him, looking for teaching and wisdom, or for healing (as Mary Magdalene did). It might have been the Kingdom of God that some started off looking for, or for the Messiah who would liberate them from their misery. Maybe the experience of being personally forgiven was the first desire of some of them. Or maybe that very modern thing – the longing for a meaning and direction for their lives. All of these things they looked to Jesus for – but as time went on, they have discovered that it is him, himself, who is the goal and heart what they seek.

If someone asked you what you're looking for when you come to church, you might answer that you're looking for peace, or the gift of inward strength; it might be that you come for a good sing, or to feel better and have a fresh start for your new week; maybe you would say come for some teaching, or to have your spiritual batteries re-charged, or to spend time with your spiritual family, to enjoy a special kind of community. Perhaps you would say that you come for Holy Communion. All of these are good answers, but as you've gone on as a Christian, perhaps you've come nearer to the place where you would instinctively answer that when you come to worship, you're looking for God (or Christ) – you're 'what' has become a 'whom'. You've grown in your sense that all those other good things are found in him. ...and that sometimes you have to pay attention just to him to discover all those things in their true depth.

So, if our best answer to what we're looking for when we come to church is 'God himself', or 'Christ', I believe this shapes the beginning of the worship we share – or should do! Our worship should begin by paying him attention, for himself, and in himself.

This is why – as many of you know – I try to encourage a period of quietness before the formal worship begins – a time when friendly chatter and the exchange of news and greetings falls silent; the presiding priest comes and sits prayerfully in the chair, music is played or, on some Sundays, worship songs are sung, and we try to collect our scattered and distracted minds and hearts to remember who we are looking for. Of course those still arriving are greeted warmly at the door – but relatively quietly; of

course children who are present may not choose to be silent – and that's all right. But for those of us who are in our places, and don't have the responsibility for welcoming or looking after children – our calling is to wait upon God.

What might go on in your mind during that time, to help you focus on who we're all looking for? It might be that there's some learned prayer from long ago – from your childhood, or your confirmation preparation – which you were taught as an appropriate preparation for worship. I don't think we do much teaching of such prayers now; perhaps it's a pity. A very old one, of course, is '*Come, Holy Spirit, visit the hearts of your people, and kindle in us the fire of your love*'. (We sometimes use that prayer in the vestry before the service.) Or for some people, it may be phrases of a worship song or a hymn – even something as simple and old as '*Come into his presence singing Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!!*' which you run through your mind. For others, who have learned methods of waiting on God through meditation, there might be some kind of stilling, some kind of mindfulness and awareness of presence, which you could use briefly and expectantly before worship begins; for others, who've been touched at some stage in their lives by the charismatic movement, praying quietly under your breath in tongues may be a way of surrendering the busyness of your mind to the direction and presence of God...

However you do it, I do believe it's important somehow to bring to mind what you're seeking – the one we're all looking for – to contribute by your deliberate participation in it to an atmosphere of expectation and longing desire...

And then we're all invited to stand, and the president says, as though to echo the silent desire of all our hearts - but also to assure us that in our worship that desire is and will be met – the ringing words, *'The Lord be with you'* (– or sometimes, *'The Lord is here...'*)

After this short liturgical greeting, (which is really quite profound when you stop to think about its meaning,) there's time for the more informal welcome to everyone present, before we sing wholeheartedly – that is, with hearts which are now attuned and prepared - our opening hymn.

There are other elements early in the service which may express the thought that we come here looking for God: the opening prayer in its various forms over the year usually expresses a desire, in some shape or form, that the Spirit of God may actually be *within* us as we worship – that he may be teaching us to pray, lifting or cleansing our hearts, worshipping *in* and *through* us as we are caught up in the mutual love of the Holy Trinity: we couldn't express more strongly our desire for God than to invite his very presence within us. And later, as we prepare to confess our sins, we sometimes use this invitation: *'As we prepare to meet Christ in word and sacrament* (and I often add, *'and in each other'* – because I believe that's true, too) – let us call to mind and confess our sins...

All of this gives a context for the whole of our worship: very part of it is about meeting with God: hearing the Scriptures and the sermon, praising God for his mighty deeds as we set aside bread and wine to become Jesus' closest presence to us, and receiving it in the bread and

wine of Communion; sharing the Peace, and knowing that we are the Body of Christ together - all of this is about seeking and finding God. For this is what we come to church to do. And the seeking and finding we do in church sets the context for our wider lives – we find him there in ways which feed into our corporate worship, but also our shared experience on a Sunday sharpens our faculty of awareness to recognise him when he comes to meet us in the ordinary things of life.

Sometimes Christians are granted a special gift of feeling the closeness of God in some religious or mystical experience: I've heard one or two people here say that there have been moments when they've known what felt like a hug from the Lord. Other people might apprehend his closeness in a less intimate, and perhaps more awe inspiring way. These things may depend on occasions, on what God wants to convey through a special visitation; they may also depend on personality and spiritual sensitivity.

For many of us, such experiences are few and far between – we may feel we've never had them. They may be part of what we're longing for when we say we're looking for God. What the Bible teaches us is that seeking and longing – even with grief – is a blessed state in itself. If we had sung a psalm today, it would have been Psalm 42 – *'As the deer longs for the waterbrooks, so longs my soul for you, O God.'* Or there's a similar psalm – number 63 – which expresses the same thing in an even more desperate way: *'O God, you are my God, eagerly I seek you, my soul is athirst for you. My flesh also faints for you, as in a dry and thirsty land where*

there is no water. So would I gaze upon you in your holy place, that I might behold your power and your glory...'

We see some of this ardent longing, this desperation, in the figure of Mary Magdalene, as she wept and longed for Jesus outside his empty tomb.

In the end, her yearning was granted its fruition, but not in a clap of thunder or a blaze of glory: for her, it came in a single word, a familiar voice as it pronounced her name.

It's never wrong to long for more of God, but part of what we learn as we come to church regularly, faithfully and lovingly, is to recognise him when he comes not only in startling and outstanding experiences, but in the familiar and regular gifts which we share here together.