

La Côte 19th July 2020

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- By way of a sermon I've been invited to read a poem I wrote : 'The Magdalene Ragtime Blues'
- As with most poems, it's best left to speak for itself, but it may help to have a brief comment beforehand
- Look at the Gospel reading : look at Mary Magdalene in the garden - a woman, perhaps the most 'real' of the women in the Bible - certainly one with whom I know a number of women have said they identify more easily than with some of the other supposedly 'Christian' images and ideals of womanhood (though maybe it's not my place to say, not being a woman ;-)
- Sometimes, one is aghast at what an institutional patriarchal church has done to the good news of Jesus, the man of Nazareth, and more specifically what it has done to women
- Think of Mary, Jesus's mother : the point of the Incarnation is that god comes into the *supposed* scandal of a teenage unmarried pregnancy, a young woman in trouble, and says 'here is the place to start if you want to find beauty, truth, hope'
 - And yet centuries of religious conditioning have sanitised her, constructed a 'respectable' Virgin-ideal, and imprisoned her in stained-glass
- Similarly with Mary Magdalene : centuries of bourgeois respectability have looked at her a bit sniffily as a supposedly fallen woman, and allowed her into the club of the 'saintly' and acceptable only as someone who has mended her ways
 - **But** : it is *as she is* that Jesus loves her, god loves her, loves us : precisely because she is *not* respectable, sensible, and 'nice' in a conventional model of propriety ... but because she is real, and passionate, and sensual ; and strong and sometimes vulnerable ; and generous and sometimes self absorbed ; and right but sometimes wrong
- In short, she is real ; she is entirely loveable ; she is loved

- So this poem is about some places where authenticity, truth, god and 'godliness' (in the widest sense) are *not* to be found, and some places where it just might be worth looking instead
- Many are focused around the idea of incarnation which is central to Jesus's Good News : authenticity, truth, god and 'godliness' are to be found in the earthy stuff of human existence, not in pristine unsullied divinity, not in religious institutions, not in correct doctrine, not in that old hymn which describes god as remote, detached and 'immortal, invisible, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes' : beautiful lines : but profoundly wrong
- God is in the earthy humbleness and the gloriously scandalous, beautifully messy, generous, organic tangle of the world and the lives we inhabit, and the people we are

(For those who like that sort of thing, you'll find references to Dickens, the 'Barchester Chronicles', Rio de Janeiro, 'The Mission', Don Cupitt, Thomas Hardy, Haiti and quite a few other places ...)

The Magdalene Ragtime Blues

*Not in the squeaky-clean, sterile stained-glass
Of the glazy-eyed, virginal saint,
With the prettified, pious persona, primped up
Adjuring us to pure, chaste restraint in some
Wide-eyed and innocent, cutesy-pie,
Nicely demure, laced-up charm or, what's worse,
In the slime of a Slope,
With pecksniffian, oiled, sanctimonious smarm ...*

*... But in the honky-tonk
Magdalene magnificence
Of the lived-in,
The life-in-the-flesh,
The sacredly sensual,
The earthed and the earthy,
The wildness of
Holy passion
In hallowed groves ;
And in mothers and daughters
Through the ages.
Who have looked, lusted,
Loved, lost and found ;
And in fathers and sons
Who stumble,
Fall down and get up,
And fall down
And get up,
Who have longed
And have touched
And have felt, hurt and healed*

*And in the kindness
Of the wounded
Who nevertheless
Still live
Brightly,
Generously*

*Not in the rite, the repetitive rote
From the arid, ascetic high-ground,
Nor the dour and de-human 'Do Not'
Of the rule-book's controlling, tight-bound grip ;
Nor in the self-assured, orthodox smirk of
Dogmatic and donnish didacts,
Nor the preacher's forensic, inductive detour
Through fact-filled valley and blind back alley ...*

*... But in the deep-dappled
Mystery glade,
Where the haunting beauty
Of the pipe's lilting voice
Draws us out
From where we lurk
In the shadows*

*Of our hiding places,
Inviting a 'yes'
To life's tangle of riches ;
And in the stories told
And shared on the way,
Meandering through
The doubt and the dissonance,
Tumbling in the turbulence
Of eddies
Where rivers run deep,
And flowing into
The sea
Of seeking faith
In little hints of glimpses
Of Life,
Of liberation :
For self,
And for others
Too*

*Not in a starched hieratical shell,
Institutional wheels ever-grinding, round
A codified corpus, feeding on self,
To determine its own right and wrong ;
Nor in a clubbable hide-in-your-tribe,
Firmly and snugly enclenched in a nook
Of protected fragility, bunkering-down :
Your identity safely entrenched ...*

*... But in the first fledgling
Rebel impulse
That flutters free
In search of self
And truth
And hope ;
And in the movement
Of those
Who travel together
In diverse company,
In rainbow colours
Of shared humanity*

*Not in the rarified, statuefied pomp
Of the mountain top, holy-on-high
On a pedestal far from the low madding crowd,
Standing-by in aloof, pristine pose ...*

*... But incarnate in the
Dust and heat
Of the favela,
Or the slum,
Or the tumbledown
Tenacious hope
Of Sana'a or Bogotá,
Of Petit Goâve or la Gonâve,
Of Kampala, or Kandahar*

*Of Salvador, or many more :
In fact any
Of these many
Different places
I have seen
Your faces*

*Not in invisible god-only wise
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes ...*

*... But in tunes, sweet and delicate, hinting at truths
As you sing me the
Magdalene Ragtime Blues*
