

After England's defeat on Wednesday evening preachers all over the country have been rewriting their sermons. Now that no-one's on tenterhooks about the Final what will they do with all their clever references? Like Calvinists asking "Whose side will you be on when the final whistle is blown?" Liberals talking about working together and the fact that, if you discount Judas Iscariot, Jesus also had a team of eleven. Catholics describing the Eucharist, with its Ministry of the Word and then Ministry of the Sacrament as "a game of two halves". Tonight I am confirming a large group of teenagers at a service postponed until 7pm in case the match went to penalty shoot-outs, and I will need to talk about the Christian life as a journey, with its ups and downs, and despite disappointments we press on with hope undaunted.

And if I dare to make a populist connection with our sermon here this morning, it will be about the relationship of success and failure. How do we identify and measure both?

Long before FIFA intervened, I had decided that on this Sunday we should focus on Mary Magdalene. In fact her feast day isn't until next Sunday, July 22nd, which always falls outside our Chapel terms. But it seems a pity to miss out on someone who is one of the most interesting characters in the Gospels, and someone who has often been misinterpreted in the centuries since.

Let's start with who Mary Magdalene was NOT. She is not the Mary of "Martha and Mary", the sisters of Lazarus at Bethany. Nor is there any reason to link her to the woman of dubious morals, probably a prostitute, who anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair. That connection became popular in the Middle Ages, some say because the male religious mind likes to see women as either totally pure – the Blessed Virgin Mary – or the total opposite. It also helps downplay the most remarkable thing about her story, which we'll see in a moment.

But there's nothing in the Gospels to suggest that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. So her song in 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' - "I don't know how to love him... and I've had so many men before, in very many ways" – is misplaced. This false connection with the woman of ill repute has sometimes been used to suggest that there was a sexual relationship

between Mary and Jesus. It's there in the film "The Last Temptation of Christ", and in the novel "The Da Vinci Code" which includes a scene set here in Temple Church. There is no evidence for that, or indeed for a lot of other things in Dan Brown's story.

In truth, Mary probably came from Magdala, a fishing town on the Sea of Galilee. She experienced some kind of healing, and joined the group of women who followed Jesus and accompanied him on his travels. So we read in the Gospels that along with Peter, James, John, and the rest of the 12, there were Joanna, Susanna, and many other women including Mary known as the Magdalene.

Earlier this year a new film, "Mary Magdalene", was released and is still being shown in Odeon cinemas here in London. Some critics have found it too softly-spoken and slow-moving, but what its two screenwriters, Helen Edmundson and Philippa Goslett, have tried to do is to present a fiercely intelligent, resourceful woman who rejected the norms of marriage and children, and insisted on following Jesus. Some people thought her mad, or possessed, but she forms this intimate relationship with him, takes her place among the twelve apostles, and in the film becomes his most avid listener and almost his favourite disciple.

The Gospels show that there was a growing problem between Jesus and his disciples, and it was about how the way we identify and measure success and failure. The disciples were looking for a glorious future. The more they came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the more they expected that he would "take back control" (yes, Brexit as well as the World Cup!) and maybe take Jerusalem by storm. It came to a head at Caesarea Philippi when Peter proclaimed his faith that Jesus was the Christ, and then refused to accept Jesus' intention to go to Jerusalem to suffer and to die.

The film contrasts these macho male disciples with Mary Magdalene who really understands the way of Jesus. Whether or not you can get all of that from the Gospel accounts, it's very true that there was, and is, this radical difference. On the one hand the way of the world, and sometimes sadly the way of religion, that the only way to get what you want is through the possession of power and if necessary the use of force. And on the other hand there is the way of Jesus. To call it the

way of love can sound sentimental, and that's not right because it has a power all of its own. But what it refuses to do is to seek success at all costs, and even embrace seeming failure if that's the only way to be true to itself. Yet it also claims that in the end it will win through.

I think the English football team have shown that success doesn't always mean winning. I leave you to decide on which side of the line there falls the kind of power Donald Trump has shown during this week's visit to Europe. I'm clear where our new Bishop of London stands: in her first Easter message she quoted Pope Francis "I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

In the Gospels this divide reaches its climax at the end of the story, in that last week in Jerusalem. The disciples begin to unravel. Judas gives in: this is not the end result for which he's given so much, and he cashes in his conscience. Peter gives up: he denies ever knowing Jesus, to save his own skin. Who is left to gather round the Cross? Only, we read, the women who have followed him from Galilee, and among them one Mary Magdalene.

And she receives her reward, as we heard in the Second Lesson. Easter Day dawned with a deep sense of failure. Amidst the despair and gloom Mary Magdalene goes to the garden to anoint the dead body of Jesus, only to find that even that has been taken away. And then she discovers that all is not lost. The way of love has not been defeated. But nor has it been compromised in the way that victory has been won: the future has been secured not by the use (and abuse) of power, but through suffering and self-sacrifice.

And here is the most remarkable thing in the story of Mary Magdalene. It is she, and not the disciples, to whom Jesus first appears. She is the first to know he is risen. She is the one to go and tell them what's happened. She becomes "the apostle to the apostles".

What do we learn from Mary Magdalene? That there is no easy path to success. Sometimes we have to listen, to be open to the alternatives. Sometimes we have to just wait, wait at the foot of the Cross. But we

place our hope in the One who stayed faithful to the way he had adopted at the beginning, rejecting the Temptations to take an easier way, the way of power and glory, and the One who at the end, on Easter Day, came through.

This is the good news which Mary Magdalene is sent to bring us today. This is our Hope for when we die, for “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so they also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” ⁽¹⁾ And this is the Hope which urges us on in this world when, Jesus, we have promised, to serve you to the end. ⁽²⁾

(1) Words from today's anthem, "If we believe..." by John Goss.

(2) Final hymn: "O Jesus I have promised".