

She supposing him to be the gardener

Some words from the Gospel we have just heard read, '*She supposing him to be the gardener*'.

The gospel account tells us of Mary Magdalene on that first Easter Day. She had gone to the tomb [we are told] whilst it was still dark and discovered the stone rolled back. She called Peter and John who witnessed the empty tomb and they went home, but Mary Magdalene remained and the Risen Christ spoke to her, but in her grief she didn't recognise him and St John records, '*She supposing him to be the gardener*'. The Greek says literally, 'thinking that it was the gardener' but it was clearly a simple case of mistaken identity - or was it? We have to remember that this is St John's account and with the Fourth Gospel we always need to search for a deeper meaning.

Perhaps the point that St John is making is that Mary Magdalene was not mistaken, Jesus was indeed the gardener walking in the garden in the cool of the day. He was the new Adam and Mary Magdalene was the new Eve in the new creation that God had brought about through the resurrection. He called her by name – *Mary* – and she recognised him but he told her not to cling to him but to go, and she went to tell the disciples that she had seen the Lord.

Perhaps, for St John, as Adam and Eve represent the old creation, so Jesus and Mary Magdalene represent the new creation. Jesus, the great high priest sends Mary to proclaim victory and salvation so it is no wonder that she has been described as 'the apostle to the apostles' and the Church has always recognised that creation and salvation belong together. More recently theologians have written about Christians as priests (rather than stewards or lords) of creation – priests of creation entrusted with the care of God's world. St Paul also reminds us that through baptism we share in the priesthood of all believers and are all redeemed and partake of Christ's salvation.

The ministerial priesthood only makes sense when viewed in the light of the priestly nature and calling of all Christians – who are called to be priests of creation sharing in the priesthood of all believers. But that's enough theology for the moment.

I want to tell you about Thelma – Thelma Barrett, who came to work with me in my parish at the Elephant & Castle some 40 years ago. Thelma was a wife and mother who trained as a SPA – a Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary, a kind of parish worker peculiar to the Diocese of Southwark. She described herself as 'fair, fat and forty something,' but it was Thelma as much as anyone else who taught me the value of women in ministry. Although she had little formal education, she was brilliant pastorally – I never knew her to mishandle a pastoral situation. Although an extrovert, she knew how to listen and she was very much a team player. The picture of Thelma in the parish pantomime wearing hob nail boots, a ballet tutu and a bent wand singing, 'Nobody loves a fairy when she's 40' is one that I shall never forget along with her rendition of 'My old man says 'follow the band'" whilst holding a birdcage with a stuffed bird inside.

Thelma was totally committed to the Lord and to ministry but recognised that Southwark Pastoral Auxiliaries would not be recognised anywhere else, so I persuaded her to explore becoming a deaconess. She completely flummoxed the Selectors whose report opened with the words, 'Thelma is truly a *rara avis* – a rare bird – I suppose putting it in Latin sounded less sexist, and they went on to say that they all agreed she should be ordained but saw no point in taking her away from the parish to train her to do what she had been doing so brilliantly for the past ten years. So Thelma was ordained a deaconess and later a deacon and became a hospital chaplain. In retirement, she was ordained to the priesthood and at her first Eucharist we all acknowledged that becoming a priest had simply made an honest woman of her.

Thelma died as she had lived. She had cancer and I visited her on her 70th birthday in

a hospice and gave her a gin and tonic which she had to drink with a straw. She then said to me, 'When you come to the end of your life, you have to ask yourself if you really believe what you have been teaching and preaching all these years'. Then she paused, and seeing the apprehension on my face, smiled and said, 'And I do'.

What I learned from Thelma was the importance of ministry being rooted in God and knowing ourselves to be unworthy servants called to attract people to him and not to ourselves. What I learned from Thelma was that pastoral ministry was about listening to what people were feeling and to help them to feel better. What I learned from Thelma was the importance of not taking oneself too seriously and being prepared to be the fool and even a clown for Christ's sake. What I learned from Thelma is that all priests are also deacons called to give their lives in loving service which requires *kenosis* – self-emptying.

After sharing in ministry with Thelma, I found it unthinkable not to have men and women working together in ministry bringing their complimentary gifts and insights to build God's kingdom and I have been greatly blessed in serving with some remarkable women and men.

Part of the vision for developing ministry areas is to enable men and women, lay and ordained to work together. It sounds so obvious and simple and biblical, but it actually involves a huge cultural shift away from priests being 'popes in their own parishes'. In a way it is like celibacy, it is contrary to nature, so we have to work hard at it.

At the heart of priesthood is sacrifice, perhaps not so much in material ways as in giving of our time and energies, of letting go of personal ambitions, of knowing when to say nothing and keep silent, of developing eucharistic hearts that are filled with thanksgiving, of allowing others to do what we could do better ourselves– in other words of letting go of the ego.

Jesus asked Mary Magdalene, '*For whom are you looking?*' and that is a question that we constantly have to ask ourselves. 'For whom am I looking? We cannot sustain ministry if we ourselves are running on empty and no longer looking to deepen our relationship with the Risen Lord. But like Mary Magdalene we must not cling to him for our own sakes because Jesus never asked us to worship him but to follow him.

My sisters and brothers, fellow priests, at the end of your life your coffin will be placed in church the other way round so as to face the people. It is a poignant reminder that like the Lord we serve, we are called to live our lives for others, so may his grace sustain us and uphold us - and to him be the glory. Amen.