

It is ironic that on the church set Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, the lectionary appointed readings for Evening Prayer should make no mention of Mary Magdalene. Admittedly in former times, days were calculated from sun-up to sun-down, so in some sense the feast could be seen to be already concluded. But there is no mention in scriptures appointed for last night which in former times evening prayer could have been seen as the first service of the new day. It becomes especially ironic when the Christian scripture reading appointed for today is from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. As doubtless you know St. Paul was no great advocate for the voice of woman in the church. In the 14th Chapter of his 1st Letter to the Corinthians, he said, *Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak but should be subordinate, as the law also says.*

Last week I spent some time on the differences between Celtic Christianity and Roman Imperial Christianity. In Roman Imperial Christianity any notion of the divine feminine was entirely suppressed while in Celtic Christianity the divine feminine was powerfully recognized. The Celtic Church viewed Mary Magdalene with deep reverence as the first witness to the resurrection. The notion that Mary Magdalene was a penitent prostitute was promulgated in 591 of the Common Era by Pope Gregory the 1st. An example of a long tradition of the suppression of woman and female spirituality in the western church. Like the Celtic Church, the Orthodox Church has never subscribed to the notion of her as a former prostitute. Indeed, the Orthodox Church honours her as a Myrrh bearer in that she brought the burial spices to the tomb and regards her as an equal to the apostles. So on this feast of St. Mary Magdalene, let us cherish her faithful example of service to our Lord as we prepare later this year to celebrate 50 years of the ordination of women in the Anglican Church of Canada. In 1969, Pope Paul VI removed the title of penitent from Mary Magdalene repudiating her description as a reformed prostitute.

Now I should get on to discussing one of our appointed readings for this service. But I would like to begin by introducing Saul of Tarsus whom we know best as St. Paul. Saul was born to a devout Jewish family in Tarsus a prosperous city not far from the coast of the Mediterranean in present day Turkey. Tarsus was a free city within the Roman Empire. Saul's father was a Roman citizen and Saul inherited that status. His family were among the Pharisees, and Saul began schooling in the synagogue quite probably as early as five years of age. By the time Saul was born in the last years before the Common Era or very early in the Common Era, the synagogue in Tarsus had become a centre of learning that attracted engagement from a significant number of gentiles as well as the core Jewish membership. The focus of worship and teaching had moved significantly away from detailed obedience to the law in all its forms to a focus on ethical living. So while Saul was raised and formed into a devout Jew it was an early formation quite different in emphasis than he would have been exposed to had he been in Jerusalem. Saul did, indeed, move to Jerusalem in his early teens to complete his education. Unlike his native Jerusalemite fellow Pharisees, he was used to

working with gentiles. This will emerge clearly in his eventual ministry among the followers of the Way and his struggles with the factions in Judaism known as the Judaizers that insisted that one needed to become a Jew, including circumcision for men, before one could be a follower of the Way. That raises another issue. Whether as Saul or Paul, he lived out his life as a Jew. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah promised throughout the history of the Children of Israel. There was nothing in his becoming a follower of The Way, that was a contradiction for him to his Jewish faith. The final separation of church and synagogue had not even begun during Paul's life. Paul was not a convert to Christianity. He was a faithful Jew who experienced a revelation of the Messiah in Jesus. The term Christian was not in wide-spread use by followers of The Way to self-identify until well after Paul's execution. The term was originally coined by Antioch Gentiles as a pejorative term for those who followed Jesus.

The final point I want to make concerns scripture. Paul was deeply educated in the Hebrew Scripture. He knew every reference to the coming of the Messiah and after persecuting followers of The Way he came to believe that the promises were realized in Jesus. But understand Paul's letters became the base on which the Christian testament was written. The earliest Gospel was written around the time or somewhat later of Paul's execution. That last Gospel, that of John was written at least 25 years or as many as 40 years after Paul died. Throughout Paul's ministry, his were the only texts extant about Jesus and The Way. Of all the letters said to come from Paul only seven are now believed to be his actual work: 1st Thessalonians, Galatians, 1st Corinthians, 2nd Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans. Be very clear these are not described as letters as a literary device. They are actual letters written to address real issues in each of the churches.

Our passage this evening comes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. The key word in our passage is consolation. God provides us with consolation in all our afflictions, so that we may be equipped to offer consolation to others. As is so often the case, there are problems with translation. The word translated as consolation is *paraklesis* which is literally translated as "calling to one's side". It implies actual active, continual help no matter the circumstances. *Paraklesis* is no consolation prize. It is not second best. *Paraklesis* is also not a guarantee against affliction; it is a guarantee of the active presence of God at our sides. Please remember that the Greek word for the Holy Spirit is the *paraclete* – the one standing alongside; i.e. practicing *paraklesis*. Paul message to the Corinthians is that God will be with us in all our suffering and that we should emulate God in our encounters with others who suffer. In the years in which Paul was writing, there was continual turmoil in all aspects of life across the Roman Empire and beyond connected to ethnicity, religion, power structures, authenticity, belief. Remarkably like today, don't you think. Can we feel God alongside us in the turmoil? Can we be alongside others who experience more difficulty than we? These are the questions our reading asks of us. Amen