

Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on St Mary Magdalen's Day, Friday 22nd July 2011, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

One of my favourite Charlie Brown cartoons, is about the loss of security. It's one of those thoughtful Peanuts cartoons that has no punchline, no joke: just a point to ponder. Charlie Brown and Peppermint Patty are sitting under a tree, and she asks what he thinks security is. He says, 'security is sleeping in the back seat of the car.' 'When you're a little kid, and you've been somewhere with your Mom and Dad, and it's night, and you're riding home in the car, you can sleep in the back seat. You don't have to worry about anything - your Mom and Dad are in the front seat and they do all the worrying - they take care of everything.' Peppermint Patty relaxes into the imagined scene. Charlie Brown says, 'But it doesn't last! Suddenly, you're grown up, and it can never be that way again. Suddenly, it's over, and you'll never get to sleep in the back seat again. Never.' Peppermint Patty asks, 'Never?' Charlie Brown replies, 'Absolutely never.'¹

Many believers, I think, might admit to recognising a subliminal portrait of religious faith, in that cartoon. Think, if you can, of your early conceptions of God, when you were a child. In each of us, those images will have been uniquely personal; but speaking for myself, I'd say that image of Charlie Brown's parents in the front seat, 'taking care of everything,' so I didn't have to worry about anything – that was a big part of what God was first like, for me. The guardian, the protector, the perpetually gentle Shepherd who was there to intervene and prevent anything bad from happening. 'He shall defend thee under his wings; thou shalt be safe under his feathers' (the beautiful words of Psalm 91). If this early conception of God had a soundtrack, it would have been the Evening Prayer from Hansel and Gretel: all about our guardian angels keeping watch as we sleep.

That image of God gets tested, as we bump up against the sharp edges of experience. It may happen early in life; it may happen later on. But the time comes, when we pray earnestly and faithfully for some kind of protection or preservation – for ourselves or for someone else – and we do not get what we prayed for. I can still recall when that realisation sank in, for me as a child. And it all came sharply into focus again, several years ago, when my mother was in her last illness. I think of one day in particular, when she was lying helpless in bed in a care home, in physical distress and terrible mental confusion. She was sending up a steady litany of frantic prayers, asking God and all the angels and saints to take away her pain. There she was: the person who had taught me to pray (the person who had in a sense taught me to think of God as those parents in the front seat, taking care of everything) – there she was, praying with every ounce of strength she had, seemingly to no avail. The other day I was talking about matters of faith with a lecturer working in this university, who came to Christianity later in life. She subsequently found that the security of her faith was given a heavy jolt by the untimely death of her father. This has made her, she says, into what she calls 'a confused Christian.' The time comes to us all. There is a settled expectation; it gets negated or denied by experience. An image of God has been lost; and we either turn away from believing in God altogether, or we have to refashion our way of thinking about God, to take account of our experience. The old security is taken away, and somehow or other, we are virtually forced to move on.

In today's Gospel, Mary Magdalen experiences both the pain and the joy of having all that she expected of the Lord, of having what she thought she knew, taken away. She goes to the tomb to continue mourning his death (maybe also to anoint him, as it says in the synoptic Gospels). For her, that empty tomb is an occasion for redoubled grief. She doesn't take it as

a sign that he is alive. That thought doesn't occur to her. She draws a rational conclusion: for some unknown reason, someone has taken the corpse away, and has taken with it even the cold comfort she would have had in showing her love for the Lord once again. What she expected would have been painful and bitter; what she finds feels even worse; yet the reality behind it all is good beyond all hope or fantasy.

This is often the way when our expectations and images of the Lord are overturned, denied, broken to bits. Our first experience is of an absence: abandonment, forsakenness, maybe a feeling of being tricked by a God who has not been as good as his word. If we persevere in faith, sometimes after a period of alienation and withdrawal, we may slowly start to reconfigure our image of God, start to redraw the larger picture. And one truly amazing thing is, that even when we don't do it on our own, God has a peculiar way of getting around our alienation and withdrawal, with some new reality which leads us to reassess everything we thought we knew. Our expectation that God would insulate us from misfortune: did we really think our own lives could be so different from the story of the Cross? Did it occur to us to think that there might be something in the very fabric of Creation which makes even abandonment and loss a strangely necessary part of the whole – the darkness by which we know what light is? And that subsequent feeling of jarring confusion and disorientation: did we really think our own lives could be so different from the story of the Resurrection, where all things are made new: reconfigured, reimagined, restored to a wholeness greater than we dared hope for?

This is why the breaking of our images and expectations of God can be such a blessing. However painful the experience, the shattering of our security can be one of God's principal ways of moving us forward, one of the principal ways in which we are enabled to learn more about him – more about God's nature and purposes for us – however imperfectly and haltingly, through the work of a lifetime.

O Christ, my Lord, again and again
 I have said with Mary Magdalene,
 'They have taken away my Lord
 and I know not where they have laid him.'
 I have been desolate and alone.
 And thou hast found me again, and I know
 that what has died is not thou, my Lord,
 but only my idea of thee,
 the image which I have made to preserve
 what I have found, and to be my security.
 I shall make another image, O Lord,
 better than the last.
 That too must go, and all successive images,
 until I come to the blessed vision of thyself,
 O Christ, my Lord.²

'I shall make another image ... better than the last.' That prayerful meditation by George Appleton is a reminder that after one image has been broken, we have a remarkably steady, persistent impulse – sooner or later – to make another. We cannot help it. Provisional as all our images may be, we keep making them. And that is a good thing, for how else can we keep alive the dialogue, the conversation, between our finite minds and the infinite glory of God?

So the next time it feels as if the Lord has gone missing, stripped your security away, pulled the rug out from under your feet – take a moment to consider whether it might be an experience, not of the absence of God but of the *presence* of God, leading you forward into new territory, to a clearer understanding of what he is about, and a better understanding of your purpose. If you feel desolate and alone, deserted and confused, remember you are in the company of St Mary Magdalen, patron of all who feel that the Lord has been snatched away from them. And patron of all for whom he has in store a new reality of wholeness and joy – something better even than security – something beyond all they could have asked or imagined.

¹ Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts* Sunday strip, 6 August 1972.

² George Appleton, in *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, ed. George Appleton (Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 147.