

**Magdalen: 550th Anniversary of the Laying of the Chapel's Foundation Stone:
Acts 10.44-end; Luke 8: 1-3**

+May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

It's a great privilege to preach on this, the 550th Anniversary, minus one day, of the laying of the Chapel's Foundation Stone. I do so not only as a proud alumnus of Magdalen, but as the College's Visitor, as Bishop of Winchester and successor therefore to Magdalen's founder, William of Waynflete. Waynflete is just one of my many intimidatingly illustrious predecessors: predecessors who include the saintly St. Swithun, after whom the relevant quad here in Magdalen is named, and Lancelot Andrewes who oversaw the translation of the Authorised Version of the Bible. I am honoured and delighted to stand in that heritage and be here today – and the simple question I want to pose to us today is simply this: why is Magdalen named as it is? Why 'Magdalen College' at all? Why did Waynflete choose St. Mary Magdalen? It is a deceptively simple question: deceptively simple, because in answering it, we will also be asking a deeper question, as to what it is upon which this College is founded – which isn't a bad question to ask on this the 550th Anniversary of the laying of the Chapel's Foundation Stone by President Tybard and Bishop Toly of St. David's on 5th May 1474.

In 1429, when he was still only in his early 30s, William Waynflete became headmaster of Winchester College. The College stands just a couple of hundred yards from Wolvesey Castle, the sumptuous episcopal palace built by Henri de Blois, King Stephen's younger brother, and grandson of William the Conqueror: a palace Waynflete would later occupy as Henri's successor, as Bishop of Winchester. Not far the other side of Wolvesey Castle from the College stands St Giles' Hill, just outside the city. And it was while he was headmaster of the College that Waynflete was also appointed by Bishop Beaufort to the mastership of the hospital of St Mary Magdalen, a leper hospital which then stood upon the hill.

There is now no visible trace of St. Mary Magdalen on St. Giles' Hill, and Wolvesey Castle was reduced to a ruin by Cromwell's troops (so, no, I don't live there) but the College still stands, of course, as does the very nice house which is my official residence, next door to the old castle. And the road that still winds up the side of the hill is still called Magdalen Hill: history, of course, is so often wonderfully preserved in our place names.

Waynflete's mastership of St Mary Magdalen's Hospital is the most obvious link with the naming of the College he later founded: founded as a sign of his continuing dedication to Mary Magdalen¹.

¹ The Master of MCS pointed out to me, after this sermon was preached, that the Church in Waynflete is also dedicated to St. Mary Magdalen.

But what do we know about Mary Magdalen? She probably came from the town of Magdala, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee – hence her name - and she is mentioned by name no fewer than twelve times in the four New Testament gospels: more than most of the apostles and more than any other woman in the gospels, other than Jesus' mother.

What is not true about her is that she was a repentant prostitute – that is a story that owes its origin to a sermon preached by Pope Gregory in the year 591. What the gospels *do* agree about however was that she was a witness to the crucifixion, and to the empty tomb, and indeed that she met the risen Jesus. Indeed so significant was her role in announcing the resurrection to the other disciples that in 2016 Pope Francis accorded her the title of 'Apostle to the apostles'.

But what I want to focus on now is as an aspect of her life which is less dramatic, but which is nonetheless very significant. In our Gospel reading we hear how she was one of those women who supported Jesus, and indeed the other disciples. She must, then, have come from a reasonably comfortable background. In that she was not unlike William Waynflete – and indeed what they both had in common was that they both became significant patrons: Waynflete of this College and Mary Magdalen of the ministry of Jesus and the apostles.

To illustrate why that is so significant, let me share with you my favourite quotation of the moment. It comes from G. K. Chesterton, in words written in 1909: indeed they are so much my favourite words of the moment that I've incorporated them into my e-mail signature. Chesterton said this:

The more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it had established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.' [x2]

In our earlier reading from the Book of Acts we catch something of a flavour of that principle at work as we hear of the Holy Spirit falling on the people whom the Apostle Peter is preaching to, even before he's finished speaking. We will have to wait to see if such a thing happens this morning. But this sense of the Holy Spirit running wild that day seems to be just what Chesterton is talking about. Peter's words create the rule and order – he's just explained what God has done in Jesus Christ – and then, in that context, within the context of that well-argued case, the Holy Spirit runs wild, bringing radical life-giving change to Peter's listeners.

And I think you can very fairly argue that through her patronage of Jesus and the apostles, Mary Magdalen created the conditions for good things to run wild in Jesus' ministry – think of how that ministry is marked by radical teaching and subversive storytelling; by miracles and healing and people even being raised from the dead. Mary Magdalen created room for good things to run wild.

And eventually, of course, she didn't just create the context for good things to run wild; she was caught up into those very good things herself in both the crucifixion and resurrection, as she met the risen Christ, and so became the apostle to the apostles. And, in what is perhaps a prefiguring of all that, Luke notes in our passage that seven demons had earlier been cast out of her. Mary both created the conditions for good things to run wild – and was the recipient of such good things too.

And I think in similar vein you can argue too, that in founding this great College, Waynflete also created the conditions for good things to run wild. You might not think that from his original purposes, however. On 20 August 1448 he founded (and I quote), *'at Oxford a perpetual hall, called Seint Marie Maudeleyn Halle, for study in sacred theology and philosophy, to consist of a president and 50 scholars, for the extirpation of heresies and errors, the increase of the clerical order and the adornment of holy mother church.*

Those words actually applied to Magdalen's precursor, St. Mary Magdalen Hall, rather than Magdalen itself – a Hall, which in only lasting ten years, turned out to be not quite so perpetual as originally planned. However I doubt Waynflete's intention in founding this College ten years later was all that much different. Nonetheless we should note that the founder's statutes included provision for a choral foundation: a foundation which we rejoice to have represented amongst us today and which has brought so much joy and delight to so many over the centuries. Indeed I think on the evidence of today we can conclude that that foundation is not only in very fine fettle but in very fine voice too. And that foundation lies of course at the heart of that great thing which today we call Magdalen College School.

As I say, at first sight, Waynflete's aims in founding this college don't seem particularly liberal, let alone being about giving space for good things to run wild. Rather the opposite, we might think. And of course, we must acknowledge that historically the Christian faith has sometimes been used shamefully as an instrument of control and repression. Nonetheless I would certainly want to argue that, at its best, as this College and this University demonstrate, the Christian faith has established just such a rule and order that gives space for good things to run wild: through learning and scholarship; research and the creation of knowledge; through the most amazing and diverse exercise of human creativity and imagination, and in ways which have been of the most astonishing benefit to humanity and the wider world. And I thank God for it.

And today, as Magdalen's Visitor, I pledge myself to do all I can to safeguard that remarkable heritage and inheritance, not least as there are many dark forces in the world today that threaten it.

I would always want to argue in favour of Chesterton's thesis. Arguably, for instance, the role of the Christian creeds, historically, has not been so much as to restrict conversation but rather to demarcate the limits of such conversation – and thus to create an open and generous space for exploration and discovery.

I wouldn't want to claim that Christian faith is unique in this – look for example at the great Islamic scholarly tradition – but I don't think it's coincidental at all that an institution such as Magdalen should have been founded in such an unapologetically Christian culture, and that within such a culture it should have flourished, as it so self-evidently has.

And it's no coincidence therefore that this Chapel, the laying of the foundation stone of which we celebrate today, stands at the heart of this great institution. And may it always do so: not as some delightful but irrelevant monument to the past, but as a sign and a safeguard of an open, hospitable, generous space in which good things, for generations to come, run wild.

And may it do so, through its worship and witness, so that in future, just as with St Mary Magdalen, others too may be caught up into the wonder of that very best thing run wild, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. May that indeed be our experience in this Eucharist.

And may this Chapel always stand as a sign and safeguarding of all these things, so that, as in the past, just as now, so in the future too, with confidence, we may say, Floreat Magdalena! Amen.