



The Lion

A Monthly News Sheet for St. Mark's Church, Basford

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St. Margaret of Antioch

A Sermon Preached for
Wolstanton's Patronal Festival.

(Revd Preb Terry Bloor)

"If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hates you." John 15:19

The influence of the world has over the centuries, attracted a certain amount of unhealthy obsession with trying to live in a way that's completely uncontaminated by 'the world', as if that were possible. The concept has given rise to what we call Holiness Movements. However; if, the related Bible phrase... *"be not conformed to the world"*, is rendered... *"be not conformed to the worldview"*, it makes more sense.

Sunday by Sunday we recall that our Lord was killed for his challenge to the worldview of his time and so on this our Patronal Festival, we can think about St Margaret, who was tortured and killed for articulating a very different worldview that a man who was a member of the ruling elite found too challenging.

There are a lot of people or organizations that stop at little in persecuting those who challenge their own desired worldview; perhaps the governments of Russia, China and North Korea might be fairly cited?

The gospel, I've chosen (John 15: 18-21) for this feast of a martyr, shows the Bible at its most realistic about the cost of speaking out into a violent and oppressive culture. It's the right thing to do, but it is certainly costly. The story of Margaret of Antioch was intended to speak directly into a culture of privileged entitlement where violence was seen as legitimate.

We accept that Margaret may or may not have even existed, but for sure, her story was one of the most popular told of the saints in medieval times. She was one of the three saints that Joan of Arc believed had spoken to her and she was considered the most powerful saint for women in childbirth to pray to.

Stories that circulate and take on a life of their own are always fascinating for that very reason: if Margaret didn't exist, you might say that it makes her story all the more fascinating! The author, Terry Pratchett once said... *"some stories, if they don't exist, just have to be written."* Some of the medieval stories of the saints – (*hagiographies* we call them) are perhaps best understood as falling into this category. They were written and retained because of their ability to challenge worldviews to state truths and offer alternative possibilities. What matters in hagiography, as in fairy tales, isn't that they tell us whether or not dragons exist – it's that they tell us that dragons can be defeated.

So what is it about Margaret's story that means that it was worth making up, or worth retelling, and that made it so enduringly powerful for centuries? The story's power is in its challenge to a culture of privileged entitlement; a particular culture in which the male was privileged and women were routinely dismissed as weak, feeble and unworthy of a public voice.

Margaret's story starts by telling us that she was sent by her noble father, a pagan priest, to a Christian wet nurse. Her mother died, perhaps in childbirth or perhaps sometime in her infancy as Margaret remains with the wet nurse to be brought up, and is baptized. On hearing this her father disowns her, and she remains in the foster care of her nurse. We then fast forward to her 16th years of life when, according to the medieval collection of hagiographies called 'The Golden Legend'...

'On a certain day, when she was fifteen years of age, and kept the sheep of her nurse with other maidens, the provost Olybrius passed by the way whereas she was, and considered in her so great beauty and fairness, that anon he burned in her love, and sent his servants and bade them take her and bring her to him. For if she be free I shall take her to my wife, and if she be bond, I shall make her my concubine.'

This is where Margaret's story begins to be clearly about male privilege and male entitlement of her day. Olybrius is the provost. He is in a privileged position as a man and a

Clergy: Prebendary Terry Bloor ☎ 01782 623668; Reverend Pat Dunn ☎ 01782 846417; Reverend Patrick Griffin ☎ 07792 467190

Churchwardens: Diane Downard ☎ 01782 621424; Nick Atkins ☎ 01782 632213.

Readers: Janet Pazio ☎ 01782 698359; Julie Atkins ☎ 01782 632213; Ed Smith ☎ 01782 614259

Safeguarding Coordinator: Jill Ayres ☎ 01782 625327 **Parish Administrator:** Julie Atkins ☎ 01782 632213

member of the ruling elite. He sees this teenage girl, lusts after her, and assumes that he can simply take her for himself. Now, Margaret is vulnerable in this situation because of at least three factors - gender, age and class. He becomes angry when she resists his advances, but he's not going to give up on his aim of possessing Margaret, even if he has to pay attention some cultural norms which dictate the type of right he has to possess her. If she's free, he'll marry her, if a slave, he'll make her his mistress. The story evolves to relate how he eventually asks Margaret about her social status, her name and her religion. When she tells him, he's disgusted that she's a Christian, and demands that she recants her faith. Instead she has a spirited theological discussion with him, which angers him so much that he has her tortured.

The story goes into great detail about the various tortures to which she is subject and we need not elaborate upon the gruesome detail. When told she's losing her beauty through these tortures, she rejects such a statement and instead links her suffering with her salvation in God.

You see, for the Christian, Margaret tells us, our identity and value is found in our baptismal identity, not in how we look in the eyes of others. This would have been quite a powerful and potentially liberating message for young girls of her generation and culture to hear. She is shown as much stronger than him, not simply spiritually but physically too. Being subjected to further and even more ruthless torture, Margaret is presented as almost supernaturally strong, and yet throughout the story, there is no magical element described in her resilience. She's simply presented as a very tough girl, able to cope and to argue her faith even in the face of such violence and physical pain. She is tortured not simply for being a Christian, not even for rejecting the provost - she is tortured, very clearly, for being a woman who has a mind of her own and dares to speak it.

This is a story of a woman's strength, wisdom, faith and resilience but it has transferable qualities for other Christians being persecuted for various reasons. There remains a need for stories in all societies that remind us that the treatment of people as possessions to be trafficked, seized at will by those with economic or military power is unacceptable.

We need stories that reassure us that though we may not be privileged and we may feel, look and indeed not stack up too well against prevalent value scales, our identity and value is not constituted by any worldview, but by our baptismal identity in Christ.

So stories like this of St. Margaret, despite their relative factualness, are worth telling and telling often. If the stories we need don't exist, perhaps it's not a bad idea to invent them because stories, even dreamy ones, can set a scene for dreams to become reality. **Amen.**

Worship Services during August

4th	Seventh after Trinity	8.00am	Holy Communion (BCP)
		9.30am	'First Sunday' with HC
7th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>8.00am</i>	<i>Morning Prayer</i>
		<i>10.30am</i>	<i>Holy Communion (BCP)</i>
10th	<i>Saturday</i>	<i>1.30pm</i>	<i>Wedding</i>
11th	Eighth after Trinity	8.00am	Holy Communion (BCP)
		9.30am	Holy Communion
14th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>8.00am</i>	<i>Morning Prayer</i>
		<i>10.30am</i>	<i>Holy Communion (BCP)</i>
17th	<i>Saturday</i>	<i>1.30pm</i>	<i>Wedding</i>
18th	Ninth after Trinity	8.00am	Holy Communion (BCP)
		9.30am	Family Worship with Baptism
21st	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>8.00am</i>	<i>Morning Prayer</i>
		<i>10.30am</i>	<i>Holy Communion (BCP)</i>
25th	Tenth after Trinity	8.00am	Holy Communion (BCP)
		9.30am	Holy Communion
28th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>8.00am</i>	<i>Morning Prayer</i>
		<i>10.30am</i>	<i>Holy Communion (BCP)</i>

Diary Dates for August

7th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Reading Circle</i>
8th	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>19.00pm</i>	<i>Intercession workshop</i>
10th	<i>Saturday</i>	<i>14.30pm</i>	<i>Vintage afternoon tea</i>
15th	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Contemplative prayer</i>
28th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Baptism Prep</i>

Early September Dates

3rd	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Living Faith</i>
4th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Reading Circle</i>
10th	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Living Faith</i>
17th	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Living Faith</i>
19th	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Contemplative prayer</i>
24th	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>19.00pm</i>	<i>PCC Meeting</i>
25th	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>19.30pm</i>	<i>Baptism Prep</i>

Living Faith

Are you interested in learning more? The Bishop's Certificate is a one year programme for people who would like to deepen their understanding of Christian teaching, and reflect on what it means to have living faith. We will be offering the first Module on Tuesday evenings (7.30pm) from the beginning of September. For more information please speak to Terry.

Vintage Afternoon Tea

We will be holding a Vintage afternoon tea on 10th August at 2.30pm, tickets £4 each. So come and join us for light refreshment and a time to chat and reminisce.

Becoming an Intercessor

Please be advised that the 'Intercession workshop' has now been postponed until 8th August at 7.00pm. This is open to anyone who is interested in leading intercessions during our 9.30am Sunday worship. For further information please speak to Terry.