



She was the First Apostle: Mary Magdalene tells her story - One woman's view of the life of Christ.

Imagined by Michael Counsell

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Michael Counsell is a retired priest living in Birmingham, England. He has studied the Bible at University, and paid many visits to the Holy Land.

When the Church of England was debating the ordination of women as priests and bishops, many opponents repeated the mantra that women could not be priests because Jesus did not appoint any women to be apostles. This is plainly untrue, because it confuses The Twelve with the apostles. The Twelve were appointed to symbolise the twelve sons of Jacob, who were the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel; they were the origin of the Jewish church, and they had to be male or the symbolism would be lost. But many who were not members of The Twelve are called Apostles in the Bible; the most important being the Apostle Paul. The word 'apostle' simply means someone who is sent, and was used of many of the early missionaries, including at least one woman (Romans 16:7).

One of the most important tasks of the early apostles was to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdalene was the first person to see Jesus after he rose from the dead, and he told her, 'Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord.' Michael therefore wrote this play to argue that Mary Magdalene was the first person sent by Jesus to do the apostolic task of witnessing to the resurrection.

It was performed as a one-woman-show in churches and cathedrals all over England, in New York, Bermuda and Jerusalem. In Israel it was filmed and made into a video.

The Jewish film crew said that the actress was so convincing when she spoke to the Risen Christ at the end that they were almost ready to believe that Jesus is alive.

The only published criticism of the drama, in the Church Times, complained that it had rolled too many characters into one. It is possible, though rather unlikely, that Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus cast seven devils, was the same person as Mary of Bethany and the 'woman who was a sinner' who also anointed him with precious ointment, and one of the many prostitutes with whom Jesus dined and who, he said, would enter the kingdom ahead of the self-righteous.

But this is fiction, designed to illustrate the background against which Jesus spoke and the sort of people with whom he mixed. Some of his opponents alleged that Jesus (or Jeshua, to give the Aramaic form of his name) was the illegitimate child of someone called Mary (or Miriam) and a Roman centurion called Panthera. This play makes the hypothesis that they were actually talking about Mary Magdalene; but again it is unlikely that Panthera was the same as the centurion whose 'boy' Jesus healed, and the same as Longinus and Cornelius.

Nevertheless, if it makes an intriguing drama, and sends readers scurrying to find out just how much of the

text is in fact based on verses from the Bible and the archaeology of the period, and what the sayings of Jesus actually meant in their original context, it will have served its purpose.

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