

Ipswich Unitarians

THE WOMEN AROUND JESUS: FANTASIES AND REALITIES

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One of the excuses given for opposition to the ordination of women is that Jesus chose only men to be his apostles and disciples. This, of course, is quite untrue. The close companions of Jesus included both men and women, and at certain crucial moments it was the women who were the most faithful. It was the women who stood by him at the crucifixion. It was the women who took spices and perfumes to anoint his broken body. It was the women who first witnessed and announced the Resurrection.

Chief among these women apostles was Mary Magdalen, who is prominent in all four canonical gospels. There are, though, several other women who are named or mentioned in one or more of the gospels. Among them are Joanna, Salome, Susanna, Martha and her sister, Mary, and at least three others who were also called Mary. And when Luke lists the leading women disciples he ends with the words, ‘...and many others.’ (Luke 8: 3)

Sometimes the women are identified wholly or partially by whose mother they were. One of the Marys was the mother of James and Joseph, while another is called, ‘the mother of the sons of Zebedee’. And another Mary in the circle was, of course, the mother of Jesus. So while it is true that the gospels give prominence to the male apostles - the Twelve – it certainly isn’t true that these men were the only important figures in the community that gathered around Jesus, or even that they were the only ones deserving of the title ‘apostle’, which simply means ‘one charged with a mission’, or a ‘messenger’.

Women, then, were leading figures in the ‘Jesus community’, as they were to become leading figures – on a basis of equality – in the earliest Christian communities, as we know from Paul’s epistles and other sources too. Later, of course, the Church (or the ‘official’ one, at least!) was to become the domain of an exclusively male priestly caste, and it is only relatively recently that this situation has, in some denominations, been challenged and corrected. It is by no means the case in all churches, though!

It is instructive to reflect on the fate of the two most important women in Jesus’ life in the subsequent history of the Church. Mary Magdalen, the apostle to the apostles and clearly a very major figure in the Jesus community, has been libelled and slandered for almost two thousand years, and branded a prostitute without a shred of evidence in the Bible or elsewhere. Jesus may have befriended and defended prostitutes, but there is nothing to indicate that Mary Magdalen was one of them. The male-dominated institutional Church couldn’t eradicate her from the record so it neutralised her by portraying her as a pitiable ‘fallen woman’ – an object of prurient fascination – rather than as a witness to the equal place of women in the Kingdom of God. Her name was even used for institutions where girls and women judged to be ‘immoral’ were cruelly and brutally punished for their supposed ‘sins’ – something that Jesus would most certainly have condemned for its hypocrisy and inhumanity.

The gospels don’t tell us whether or not Mary Magdalen was a mother, or even if she was married. There is a tradition – suggested in John’s gospel but found particularly in non-canonical sources - that she and Jesus were very close personally. There is no reason, though, to suppose that their core relationship was anything other than spiritual – that of a religious teacher and his disciple, or student. Luke tells us that Jesus had healed her of a complaint, seen at the time as demonic possession, and that she was one of those women who supported Jesus and his

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community financially, 'out of their own resources'. She must, then, have been a woman of substance, but as to her family circumstances nothing is recorded.

The other most important woman in Jesus' life was, of course, his mother, Mary. In the gospels she is a strangely ambiguous figure. Only Matthew and Luke give accounts of the birth of Jesus – accounts which are very different and which portray Mary in very different ways: passive and submissive in Matthew; assertive, active, and prophetic in Luke. During the ministry of Jesus, though, Mary appears almost as an obstructive figure, unable to understand what Jesus is doing and even trying to stop it. His response is dismissive and suggests something of a family breach, with the ties of blood being seen as secondary to those of the spirit and of the Kingdom of God. 'Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother and sister and mother' (Matthew 12: 50), is Jesus' response on being told that his mother and his brothers are outside demanding to speak to him. It was a very public humiliation!

Only John's gospel specifically names Mary, Jesus' mother, as being present at the crucifixion, although both Matthew and Mark do mention 'Mary the mother of James and Joseph' (or, 'Joses') - the names of two of Jesus' brothers - as being there. One of these brothers, James, was later to become the leader of the Jerusalem church. But it may simply be coincidence, for these names were widely used at the time.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, only appears once more in the New Testament. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's sequel to his gospel, she is named as one of those gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost – along with eleven male apostles, 'a group of women', and the brothers of Jesus (Acts 1: 14). Like Mary Magdalen, she has since undergone something of a transformation in the theology of the Church. From a very recognisable human mother - who treasures her infant son, is bemused and worried by him when he grows up, grief-stricken at his death, and then faithful to his memory – Mary was turned into a quasi-goddess as Christianity found itself in competition with the various goddess cults of the ancient world.

Although she became this semi-divine mother figure, her real human motherhood was steadily stripped away. Unwilling to associate her with the biological realities of sex and childbearing, the institutional Church focussed on her supposed virginity at the time of the conception and birth of Jesus. And to reinforce this divorce from reality, ideas such as her 'perpetual virginity' and her own 'immaculate conception' were dreamed up in the attempt to distance her from the supposed 'taint' of 'original sin'. From being the natural, human mother of the man, Jesus – teacher, prophet, and martyr – she became, in Church doctrine, the quasi-divine 'mother of God', untouched by all that makes for true motherhood. Far from being the sister to all human mothers in the reality of their condition, she was transformed into an unattainable ideal, a fantasy, before which real mothers could only feel inadequate, condemned by their male priests to the relentless and often fatal treadmill of childbirth.

All too often the joy and miracle of motherhood became an onerous and dangerous chore – as it still is for all too many women in the world today. It is only very recently, in historical terms, that women in our own society have been liberated from this treadmill, this chore, and freed to regulate their own childbearing by means of contraception and family planning. But this has its downside too. Children can come to be seen more as commodities to which one has a 'right', rather than as the precious gifts of God; as bespoke lifestyle accessories rather than as independent living souls. And ironically, the very techniques that were developed to save women from the worst risks and dangers of childbirth are, in some parts of the world, now widely used to prevent girls being born at all. And that is a great evil. While I take exception to those

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ideologues who call themselves 'pro-life', as if no one else is, I do believe that we are in moral peril if we allow a growing life to be ended for no other reason than prejudice and bigotry.

Jesus, as we know, defended women from the self-righteous bigots of his time. He also loved little children and saw in them the innocence and purity of the Kingdom of Heaven. These two things, of course, are not in opposition and we would do well to remember it as we pick our way through the moral dilemmas of our own day.

All too often women in general and mothers in particular have been – and still are – ill-used by institutional religion. And in Christianity, the fate of both Mary Magdalen and the mother of Jesus, at the hands of theologians and dogmatists, has been a part and a symbol of this. But on Mothering Sunday, when we give thanks for our own mothers and for the joys that motherhood should bring, we might remember that the women around Jesus, in the community he created as a microcosm of the Kingdom of God, were real women, many of them mothers, as the gospels make clear.

And if Jesus himself was often on a learning curve when it came to women, it was a learning curve upwards, towards the realisation that women are just as equipped to be vessels and messengers of the Divine as any man – with the added qualification that every child of God comes to birth through one of them.
