

**Mothers' UNION**  
Christian care for families

**COMPANION BOOKLET**

**Damaris**  
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FROM THE DIRECTOR OF 'LION' AND THE PRODUCERS OF 'THE KING'S SPEECH'

ROONEY  
MARA

JOAQUIN  
PHOENIX

CHIWETEL  
EJIOFOR

TAHAR  
RAHIM

# MARY MAGDALENE

HER STORY WILL BE TOLD

CROSS / CITY  
SAW  
PERKINS

**IN CINEMAS MARCH 16**

FILM4  
FOCUS  
FEATURES  
UNIVERSAL

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# INTRODUCTION

This free resource, provided by Damaris Media and Mothers' Union, is here to help churches and individuals think through the issues raised in **Mary Magdalene** (in UK cinemas from 16th March 2018). In this guide you will find:

- Background information about the film
- Film discussion questions
- Called to follow – Activities and questions for a small group session
- What kind of Messiah? – Activities and questions for a small group session

**Before you start, read through the guide to make sure you have everything you need.**

Please feel free to use the sections you think are most appropriate for your group.

# WHAT'S THE STORY?

**Mary Magdalene** is a powerfully imagined portrait of one of the most enigmatic and misunderstood spiritual figures in history. The biblical biopic tells the story of Mary (Rooney Mara), a young woman in search of a new way of living. Constricted by the hierarchies and gender inequalities of the day, Mary defies her traditional family to join a new movement led by the charismatic Jesus of Nazareth (Joaquin Phoenix). She soon finds a place for herself alongside Jesus and at the heart of a journey that will lead to Jerusalem.

Written by Helen Edmundson and Philippa Goslett, and directed by Garth Davis, **Mary Magdalene** also stars Chiwetel Ejiofor and Tahar Rahim.



# FINDING MARY'S VOICE



The story of Jesus Christ has been told in so many different ways and has aroused such passion, in art and culture and within the worlds of historical and religious scholarship as well as in film. 'Every generation approaches their own retelling or re-imagining of stories based on the contemporary time,' says producer Iain Canning. **'We felt that the female perspective of the life and death of Jesus was a new way in to that story and that it would also shine a light on contemporary issues.'**

'There's always a certain amount of responsibility that you have when you tell stories that are incredibly important to people,' he says. 'But you've got to trust the script, your film-maker and the actors, that they're going to bring something new and fresh to it. We feel like we need to acknowledge that this is an important story for people, and so therefore tell it in the best way possible.'

The script for **Mary Magdalene** was written by acclaimed playwright Helen Edmundson along with screenwriter Philippa Goslett, whose desire to right a centuries' old wrong drew her to the project. 'I've always been very interested in the story of Jesus and felt that what happened to Mary Magdalene and her identity over the centuries was a travesty,' she says. **'Here was an**

**opportunity to give a voice to someone who had been silenced for so long.'**

Producer Emile Sherman adds, 'Mary Magdalene had been marginalised for centuries and we wanted to restore her to her rightful place at the centre of the Jesus story, as a key apostle. **Mary recognises that the 'kingdom', or whatever utopia we are striving for, needs to start within ourselves. This message is as revolutionary today as it has ever been.'**

Goslett's research took her on a journey into biblical history. 'We had a multitude of conversations with rabbis, priests, Jewish historians, biblical scholars and archeologists and everyone we talked to disagreed with each other!' she says. 'But what was even more fascinating was that they all agreed, without exception, that Mary of Magdala should be considered as a disciple and an apostle.'

'We're not proposing that this film is trying to be a theological or historical text of any kind,' says producer Liz Watts. **'The story is up for interpretation and it IS a story that we're telling but we want it to be very respectful of people's faith.'**

# A MESSAGE OF LOVE

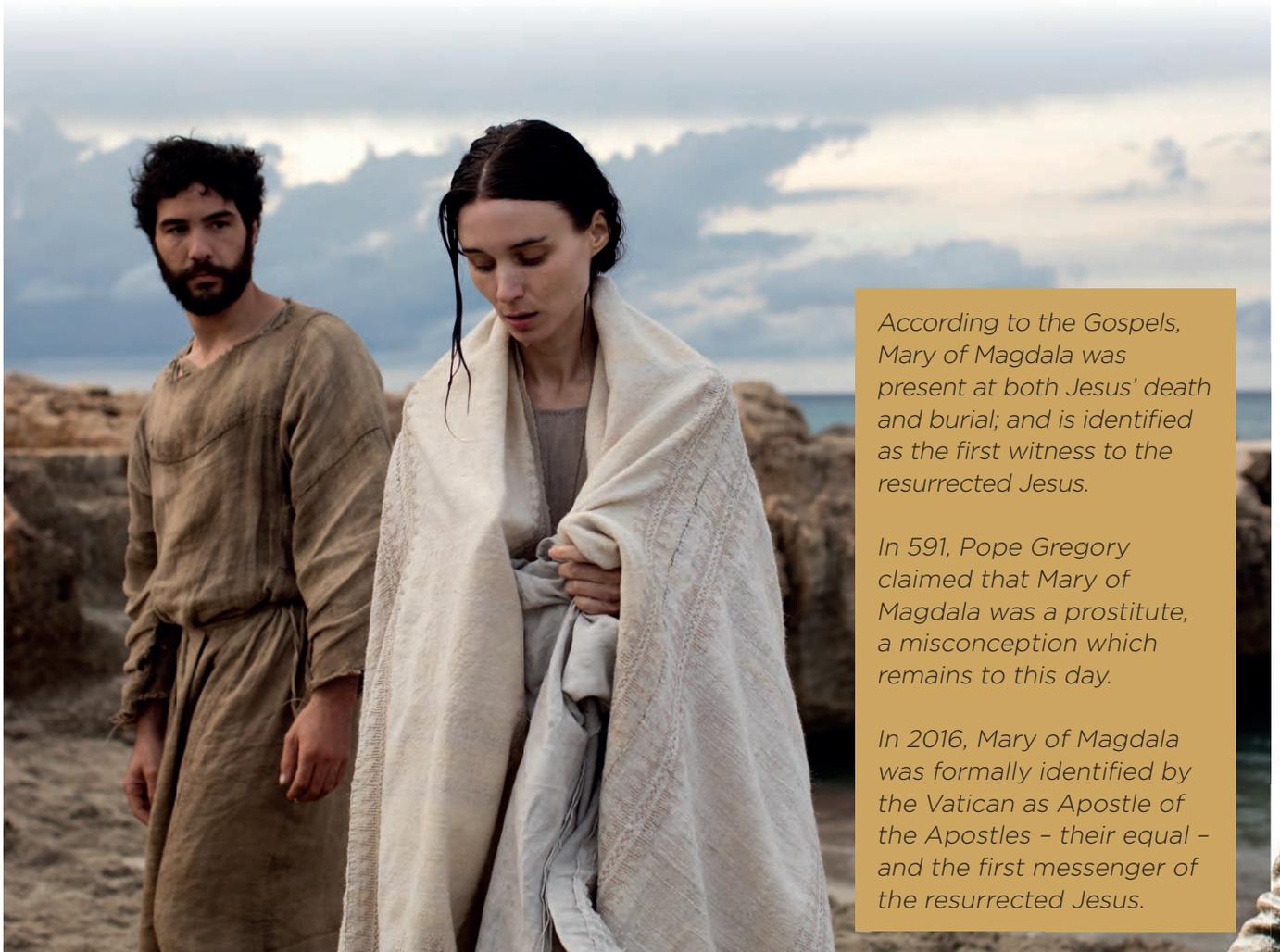
It was an unusual source that motivated Garth Davis, the award-winning director of *Lion*, to take up the reins on **Mary Magdalene**. 'One of the big inspirations for me for this film was Malala Yousafzai,' he says. 'There was something about her story that, for me, mirrored Mary's story. The fact that she was shot in the face by the Taliban because she wanted to go to school, and then forgave the Taliban for their actions. **That act of forgiveness, that act of love, was something that was at the absolute heart of this film for me.** When I read the script, I really thought of how she moved me and how Mary's story is in her. I connect with that spirituality and that love.'

The success of that central theme largely depends on the actor playing Mary. 'I thought of Rooney Mara because she's got an otherworldly quality,' says Davis. 'Mary was not someone who's learning who she is, she already has the light in her, she already has a connection to God but she doesn't yet know how to express it.'

'Most other films about Jesus are solely about him,' reflects Mara. 'In **Mary Magdalene** we still see all of the things that we're used to seeing in biblical films, but **we see it through her eyes.** And so we get to see it in a very different light.'

'I really hope people slow down a little and listen to themselves after watching this film because that's one of the messages,' says Garth Davis. **'God is in the silences. Stop the ideology and the arguments and the conversations; be in a place of love and listen.'**

The director is confident that both Christian and non-Christian audiences will respond to that message. 'For a non-Christian audience - and that includes a lot of other different faiths - I hope the film's themes will touch a chord. We would feel we hadn't succeeded if we'd only made a film that appealed to Christians; **we want to bring this incredible story to everyone.'**



*According to the Gospels, Mary of Magdala was present at both Jesus' death and burial; and is identified as the first witness to the resurrected Jesus.*

*In 591, Pope Gregory claimed that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute, a misconception which remains to this day.*

*In 2016, Mary of Magdala was formally identified by the Vatican as Apostle of the Apostles - their equal - and the first messenger of the resurrected Jesus.*



## BEFORE THE FILM

Watch the trailer for **Mary Magdalene** with your group to get them excited about your forthcoming cinema trip.

1. What is your impression of the film's characters and its story?
2. Have you seen any other portrayals of Jesus or the gospel stories onscreen recently? How do you think this film might compare?
3. What are you most looking forward to about the cinema trip?

You could share the trailer on social media to encourage others to join your trip using #MARYMAGDALENE - see [www.marymagdalenefilm.co.uk](http://www.marymagdalenefilm.co.uk)

## FILM DISCUSSION

The first thing we all like to do when we leave the cinema is talk about the film! This is your chance to chat together as a group about your reactions to **Mary Magdalene** as a cinematic experience before digging deeper into the themes.

You might want to watch the trailer together to refresh your memories before you begin talking.

1. What was your initial reaction to the film, and why? What were you expecting when you went in?
2. How did you react to the performances in the film? Which actor or character did you find most compelling? Did any of the characters surprise you?
3. How did **Mary Magdalene** create the world of First Century Palestine? Which details particularly stood out to you?
4. What sort of emotional journey did the film take you on? What emotions were you left with when the credits rolled?

# QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

## PART 1: CALLED TO FOLLOW

**Mary Magdalene** portrays a woman who is determined to obey her calling to follow Jesus - whatever the world might think.

### DISCUSS

1. What kind of life does Mary have when we first meet her in the film? What seem to be her passions and gifts, and why is she dissatisfied?
2. How is Mary treated by her family, and why do they think that she is possessed? What's unique about the way that Jesus treats her when they first meet?
3. What draws Mary to Jesus, and what new possibilities does he offer her? What did you find most exciting about Jesus when you first encountered him?
4. How do the people around Mary react to her decision to follow Jesus? Have you ever experienced other people's doubt or opposition when you felt God was calling you to something? What happened?
5. Why was it so radical for Jesus to choose a woman as one of his closest followers? What other examples do we have in the gospels of Jesus including and affirming women? How do organisations such as Mothers' Union encourage women to make their own voices heard?
6. What particular 'calling' is Mary left with at the end of the film? Do you think that all Christians share this same mission, and why or why not?
7. Did the film challenge your perception of who Mary Magdalene was? Why do you think she has often been ignored or misrepresented by the Church throughout history? How and why should we celebrate her today?
8. Think of someone you know who is/was called by Jesus in their work life. For Mothers' Union members, this may be the organisation's founder, Mary Sumner, who was called by Jesus to undertake work on his behalf. How does that person's example move you to follow Jesus and touch others' lives?

### REFLECT

Together, read aloud some of the following Bible passages (or other suitable passages of your choice). During a time of quiet, reflect on what they have to say about God's calling to each of us.

*Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 11:28-29; Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 5:29-32; 1 Corinthians 1:26-27; 2 Timothy 1:9; Revelation 22:17*

### PRAY

You may wish to sum up your meeting using this suggested prayer, or similar.

*Dear God, thank you that you called Mary of Magdala, and thank you that you called each of us. Help us to listen to your voice, even when what you say is unexpected - and give us the courage to go wherever you lead. Amen.*



# QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

## PART 2: WHAT KIND OF MESSIAH?

**Mary Magdalene's** portrait of Jesus challenges us to think about what kind of Messiah he really was, and what kind of kingdom he came to bring.

### DISCUSS

1. How would you describe the version of Jesus portrayed in **Mary Magdalene**? What was your reaction to this portrayal?
2. In the film, what ideas do Peter, Judas and the other disciples have about what Jesus has come to do? Can you think of places in the biblical accounts where the disciples think in a similar way? (Verses such as Matthew 26:51-54, Mark 10:35-37, Luke 9:51-55 and Acts 1:6 may be helpful.)
3. By contrast, how does the film portray Mary coming to understand Jesus's true mission? What does she believe lies at the heart of his life, death and teachings? Do you agree with her perspective?
4. Did **Mary Magdalene** challenge or change your understanding of Jesus and his message at all? Why is it important that we look at Jesus in the context of the time and place where he lived?
5. In what ways do you think today's church might risk misunderstanding the message of Jesus? How can we make sure we're being faithful to his true mission?
6. How are the values, priorities and power dynamics of God's kingdom different from the world's? What part do we all have to play in bringing this kingdom to earth?

### REFLECT

Read the following passage aloud to the group, and allow a time of quiet reflection.

*Imagine yourself in the shoes of the first people who chose to follow Jesus. They didn't know where the story was going – like all of us, they were caught up in their own lives and their own moment in history. They looked at Jesus and saw somebody who might have the answers. Imagine, in their place, which of your dreams you might have expected this miracle-performing Messiah to fulfil. Would you have felt impatient with him sometimes? Frustrated by the people he spent time with, by the strange things he said, by the ways he chose to use – or not to use – his power? Standing at the cross, you would have felt as though all of your hopes were dying. This isn't the kind of leader you signed up to follow.*

*It's only on the other side of Easter that we can begin to understand. Through Jesus's death and resurrection we see that God's kingdom isn't one of earthly power, but of sacrifice, service and love. That this Messiah's mission is bigger and more incredible than anything we could have dreamed up.*

### PRAY

*Dear God, thank you that you came to earth as a Messiah who turned our ideas about power and kingship upside-down. Be with us as we try to faithfully understand why you came, and what this means for our lives. We pray for your kingdom of justice, mercy and love to come and transform this world. Amen.*



Mothers' Union was established in 1876. From the outset it recognised that strong relationships and the role of family, however defined, are crucial in building healthy communities. It aims to show Christian faith by the transformation of communities worldwide, through the promotion of stable marriage and family life.

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