

Self-Discovery

In the name of him who calls us by name, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure that by now everyone has heard of the crime of identity theft. Now more than ever there are people out there looking to get hold of your personal information: your social security, credit card, bank account numbers, along with your name and address, of course, so that they can pretend to be you and cause all kinds of mischief. By assuming your identity, they can steal from you directly by making charges to your credit cards or transferring money from your bank account; but more than that they can also use your identity to get illegal passports, draw from your social security account, or bill Medicare for bogus treatments. There seems to be no end to the ways they can use your identity for evil purposes. And in this high-speed information age it's easier for them to get it and use it before you even know what's going on – which is why it's all the more necessary to protect your personal information and keep it from falling into the wrong hands. You don't want to become a victim of identity theft.

But it may surprise you to know that this is not an altogether new crime. It turns that Saint Mary Magdalene, whose biblical role and life of faith we celebrate today, is herself a victim of identity theft – albeit in a different way. It's not that people have taken her personal information and used it inappropriately; but rather that they have taken all kinds of false and outlandish information and attached it to her so that now most people have no idea who she really was. I'll give you a few examples. First, because they have the same first name, Mary Magdalene has often in the history of the church been confused with Mary of Bethany. The latter is the Mary who sat listening to Jesus while her sister Martha busied herself in the kitchen while simmering with rage at her more sedentary sibling. And because Mary of Bethany, with whom she is confused, once anointed Jesus with costly perfume, Mary Magdalene is then further thought to be the unnamed sinful woman who also anointed Jesus on a completely different occasion at the home of Simon the Pharisee. And then, because it's assumed that this unnamed sinful woman was a prostitute, Mary Magdalene gets stuck with the same notorious label. In fact, on account of all this, in Roman Catholic tradition Mary Magdalene is held up as the patron saint of prostitutes—which raises a lot of questions in my mind. For what kind of help exactly does a prostitute pray to Mary Magdalene for? That she'll do her job better? Make more money at it? Somehow it doesn't seem quite right to me ... but I digress. Anyway, if you're managing to follow all this, because there's a connection in some minds between prostitution and adultery, Mary Magdalene is then further associated with the unnamed woman taken in adultery in John chapter eight. That's the one Jesus rescued from an angry mob bent on killing her by asking that the one without sin cast the first stone. This mistaken identification is now indelibly stamped in the minds of many because that's what was shown in the film *The Passion of the Christ*. But the real Mary Magdalene was none of those other people.

Ah, but unfortunately it gets worse. In the first couple centuries of the Christian era there was a group of heretics called Gnostics. When they saw how attached Christians were to their Scriptures, they decided to write their own in order to promote their teachings and lead gullible souls astray. And to give their fanciful writings an air of authority, they pretended that they were written by people who had been close to Jesus. Maybe you've heard of the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Secret Gospel of John*, or more recently of the *Gospel of Judas* that was in the news a few months back. These writings, along with some others, were cooked up by Gnostics and falsely ascribed to genuine disciples. One of these writings is called the *Gospel of Mary* – Mary Magdalene, that is. And in the course of this rather silly book, Jesus is at one point criticized for kissing Mary. To be fair he's kissing everyone: it was a common form of greeting in the first century; but someone in the story takes offense and Jesus pretty much tells him to mind his own business. Now, even though there is never a hint that there was more to it, people with wild imaginations have speculated that Jesus and Mary might have been (what? Shall we say) *closer* than the Scriptures relate. The 1970s rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* picked up this notion by suggesting that Mary may have had some unreciprocated romantic interest in Jesus. "I don't know how to love him", she sings in desperate confusion. The notion was taken to its next ridiculous level in a 1980s film called *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In that version of the story, Jesus has a vision of what life might have been like if instead of going to the cross he had settled down with Mary and raised a family. In fact, that is the *last temptation*: choose Mary and live happily ever after or go to the cross and die horribly. At least in this film, which manages to get everything

else wrong, Jesus makes the historically accurate choice. But that's not the end of it. About a year ago, this whole absurd idea came to its pinnacle of foolishness in a book and film called *The Da Vinci Code*. In this last fight of fancy Mary Magdalene and Jesus actually do get married and they have a child who in turn becomes the ancestor of a line of French kings – but very few people know the truth because there's a massive conspiracy by the sinister Catholic Church to cover up the embarrassing details. It's kind of hard to believe how all that fiction could grow out of one little kiss in a made-up story in a falsely ascribed writing; but that is the nature of lies: little ones grow into big ones. The funniest thing is that in *The Gospel of Mary* upon which all this nonsense is based, Jesus decides he wants to make Mary one of his apostles – and since he knows he can't have an apostle who's a woman, he changes her into a man. So much for the “settle down and have kids” theory.

But there she is, Mary Magdalene: the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet, the prostitute, the adulteress, the patron saint, Jesus' girlfriend, his wife, the mother of his child, the apostle, the *man* (!)—and not a word of it true. And yet she has been falsely identified as all of them. In view of it I'd say that she is one of the worst victims of identity theft in history. But I'll tell you something else: nothing I've said so far even begins to tell the worst of it. You see, the real Mary Magdalene had her identity stolen before any of the rest of this stuff was said about her; and her identity was taken in a way so severe and so complete that even *she* didn't know who she was. Scripture informs us that the real Mary Magdalene, before she met Jesus, was possessed by seven demons. Think about that: seven malevolent and very powerful spirits within her, each trying to assert its own identity and force its control over her thoughts and actions. Try to imagine the confusion of ideas ... the conflicting feelings, the passions, lusts, other temptations ... vivid scenes of sensual pleasure alternating with visions of repulsive ugliness and violence ... all bouncing around in her mind and competing for her attention. Imagine the constant noise of the voices in her head calling, coaxing, bickering, questioning, demanding, accusing ... and all the while the real Mary, whoever she was, being pushed and shoved into the background, a prisoner of these other identities in her own body. Who was Mary Magdalene then? Not even she could have answered the question. Her true identity was captive. It had been high-jacked. It was powerless. It was lost.

And that's the way it would have remained had not Jesus come to her hometown on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee one day. Magdala wasn't much of a town. Little more than a fishing village, really; it's almost surprising that Jesus took the time to visit such a tiny, obscure place. But as it turns out, he had important business there. No one is so lost and no place so insignificant that the world's Savior won't gladly go there to set them free from spiritual bondage. Mary didn't know Jesus; like I said, she didn't even know herself. But the point is that Jesus knew her and he came to Magdala to find her. We don't have the details of her healing; but we do know that Jesus used his divine authority to drive the unclean spirits from her. And then, free from the control of those evil entities probably for the first time in her life, she discovered who she was: a person known by Jesus. Someone who had been saved by him. She found out that she was someone who had been released, forgiven, and set free to be who and what God intended her to be. She discovered that she was a person loved by the heavenly Father through Jesus his Son.

So, what I'm saying here is that when Jesus entered her life and made himself known to her, and specifically when she experienced his love and the mighty power of his deliverance from evil, she discovered herself. It was Jesus who made it possible for her to be who she really was. And we can extend that because it's true of everyone whom Jesus has freed from the curse and power of sin. All humans were created by God and designed by him to have a relationship with him. That's who we are supposed to be. The fall into sin broke that essential relationship that defines who we are. Therefore, you cannot know yourself, you cannot have a real identity, apart from knowing Christ as both Creator and Redeemer. Whoever you think you are apart from knowing Christ as your Savior is wrong. It's a false identity. It's a lost and captive identity. It's an identity that cannot endure. I'm reminded of the story Jesus told about a certain rich man who ignored a poor beggar named Lazarus who was laid at his gate. Both of the men die. Lazarus is welcomed by father Abraham into paradise while the rich man lifts up his eyes in the fires of hell. You know the story. The point I want to make is that Lazarus has a name: he is known by God. He's *somebody*. The rich man? Who's he? Nobody knows. He has no identity. I'm sure that in life he thought he was someone, someone pretty darned important whose name carried a lot of weight. But now he's a nobody, forgotten even by God.

And perhaps it's because she knew so acutely what it was to be a nobody that Mary Magdalene, when she discovered herself in Christ, attached herself so firmly and loyally to him. She became a follower of Jesus; not just someone who believed in him and sat at home; but someone who physically walked in his footsteps. St. Luke's Gospel names her as one of several women who accompanied Jesus and his disciples on their travels and who helped fund his ministry from their own means. And so I'd submit that Mary, having discovered herself, also discovered her purpose – and she threw herself whole heartedly into it. No, it was not given to her to be one of the twelve disciples, to go out and preach the Gospel. That didn't matter to her one bit. She saw that Jesus had needs. The disciples had needs. And she saw that she could do something about them, so she did. She bought food, she prepared meals, she mended and washed clothing, she did whatever had to be done so that the ministry of Jesus could continue, and more people could experience what she did and so find themselves in him. She served with pleasure because she was thrilled that Jesus had given her both an identity and a purpose.

And I suspect that's why she took it so hard when Jesus was taken away from her. No, it wasn't easy for any of those who followed him; but it seems to have affected her more deeply. Most of the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested. We find only one who stayed for a while at the foot of the cross; but Mary, from the time she learned of his arrest never left him. Stationing herself as close as was permitted the cross, she refused to be separated from the Lord Jesus who had given her so much. What was going through her mind then? No one can say for sure. We can only imagine her confusion, her horror, her empathy with him, the feelings of helplessness ... and the sense she must have had that by losing him she was losing herself all over again. At the time she could not have known that he was giving himself to death to ensure that she would never be lost again. But she did know that her life and her very identity were bound to his; and so, when he breathed his last, I am certain that she felt something die within her. She felt the spear that pierced his side make a hole in her own heart, and she knew that without him, Mary Magdalene, whoever she was, was also gone.

I suppose it was to keep from losing herself completely that she so faithfully attended the body of Jesus. She felt that her body, like his, was now an empty shell; but at least by identifying with his corpse she could hold the memory of who she had once been. She watched intently while Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea hastily prepared the body for burial. She remained there until after the tomb was sealed; as late as she possibly could because of the coming Sabbath. And then we find her back as early as possible immediately after the Sabbath was over. What a shock then, to find the tomb open and the body gone. The one thing that still gave her a shadow of an identity and purpose ... even that stolen from her now. She runs to enlist the aid of Peter and John. Maybe they can do something to get him back. But they are just as confused as she about the whole thing. They can't help. They shrug their shoulders. They leave her there alone.

So she stands staring into the murky void of the tomb. It's like a mirror of her soul: dark, empty; containing nothing. Everything is lost. Her tears begin to flow uncontrollably. At length she becomes conscious that she is not alone. Angels in the tomb ask why she is crying. Her response only indicates that without Jesus she is lost. She turns slightly to see that a man is standing close by behind her. She assumes that he is the caretaker of the garden—who else would be here so early on the first day of the week? Maybe he knows something. Maybe he removed the body. She begs him, "Please, just at least let me have his body." But he's not here to give her a corpse and the shadow of an identity. He's here to give her back herself and to make her whole again. And that's why he speaks just the one word, her name: "Mary". It's a word that says, "You don't really know me; but I know you, and I'm here to give you back your true identity. I'm here to fill your life with meaning and purpose. I'm here to ensure that you never lose yourself again."

My friends, the risen Lord Jesus is here today for exactly the same reasons. He is present with us now in his Word and his holy Sacraments to do for you what he did for Mary on the day of his resurrection. He's been doing it for you ever since you first met him – when you were lost and dead in your sins, without identity or purpose. Then he came to find you and, like Mary, he made you a participant in his death, burial, and resurrection. It's as if you were there through it all just like Mary – and in a spiritual sense, you really were there at the cross and at the grave. Then he spoke your name through the mouth of one of his caretakers and said, "[Name] I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." He let you touch him in the water, and he cleansed you of your sin and gave you new birth into the family of God. And week after week he has returned here for the same reason: to cause you to lose the sinful unbelieving part of you

that cannot endure, and to help to continue to discover more of yourself in him, and thereby keep you from losing your identity in time and eternity.

We cannot truly know ourselves unless we know Jesus the Savior. And by learning more of him and remaining in him, we discover more about who we are and what purposes God has for us. Then, like Mary, we are happy to give ourselves in service in whatever capacities we can. And we know it's important because we're living in a world in which there are a lot of people with names and addresses and social security numbers, but they do not know who they are. They only think they do. The Lord who has revealed himself to us and who calls us by name so that we have become complete and real persons in him would have us now be his hands, his feet, his mouth ... his physical body in the world to serve others and to help them also find their true selves in him. May he give us the grace to be what he has called us to be, so that through us many more people may say, "I have seen the Lord." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!