

There's a famous Monty Python sketch of the Australian Bruces, in which all the members of the philosophy department of the University of Woolloomooloo wear cork hats and safari suits and are named Bruce. That is until a new academic from England joins the department whose name is Michael. When introduced to all the Bruces, one Bruce suggests that having someone called Michael would cause confusion, so they should refer to him as Bruce.

Sometimes the Gospels seem a little like that. For instance, there are a number of James, which can get a little confusing: James the Great, son of Zebedee and brother of John, James son of Alphaeus, James the brother of our Lord, who may or may not be one and the same with James the Less, son of Mary mother of James and brother of Joseph; James the father of the apostle Jude; James, the author of the epistle James; and James the brother of Jude, author of the epistle. Johns are also a dime a dozen.

Given that about 1 in 4 Palestinian women of the time were named Mary, it's unsurprising that Marys are also strongly represented in the Gospels. There are 9 of them in the NT. The BVM, Mary Magdalene, Mary sister of Martha, Mary of Bethany, Mary of Clopas, Mary mother of James and Joseph, Mary mother of John Mark, Mary of Rome whom Paul asks the readers of Romans to greet for him, and the one helpfully described as "the other Mary". Add to this, according to tradition the sinful woman caught in adultery, and Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee (traditionally Mary Salome the sister of the BVM) and the woman (or perhaps women in two separate events) who anoints Jesus who according to tradition are also Marys (according to Mark and Matthew she is unnamed. John has her as Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and in Luke it is the mysterious 'sinful woman'.)

Understandably, there has been some confusion of the identities of various Marys over the centuries, partly caused by ambiguities and variations in the different accounts of some incidents from Gospel to Gospel. If you find it hard to identify your Marys, you're in distinguished company. Pope Gregory the Great himself confused the various Marys in a sermon of 591, thinking Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene and the repentant woman of Luke 7 who anointed Jesus's feet were all one and the same Mary.

Mary Magdalene herself is mentioned 12 times in the New Testament, with the only woman mentioned more frequently being the Blessed Virgin Mary herself. That she is known as Mary of Magdala may be an indication that she held some prominent status in that town, and perhaps was a woman of wealth and influence. This is also suggested by the fact that she is mentioned as a woman in her own right: not as the wife or daughter or sister of some man.

As is the case with many saints, Mary Magdalene's life took on a life of its own after her death. Frequently the early saints who weren't martyred became the subjects of fantastic legends about their post-New Testament activities and travels, often featuring prominently in Gnostic writings such as the Gospel of Mary. When I was an undergraduate, I spent a fair deal of time in France. One of the places I visited a few times was a small town called St Maximin-la-Sainte Baume. It was there that I first encountered a legend about Mary Magdalene. According to the legend, after the death of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus and other disciples were exiled from the Holy Land. Making the best out of bad a situation it would seem, they made their way to the South of France – if I'm ever exiled, I'd be open to ending up there too. Allegedly they made their way to Marseille, converting the locals, and set about Provence performing miracles and spreading the faith. Mary Magdalene eventually withdrew to a grotto

where she sat out her retirement. When she died, one of her co-exiles, Maximin, who became the first bishop of Aix-en-Provence, buried her in an oratory in the town of St-Maximin-Le-Sainte-Baume. If you visit that church, in the crypt you can view the purported head of Mary Magdalene in a gold reliquary. Once a year the skull is brought out from the crypt in its reliquary for a procession around the town.

Now all of that seems like stuff only the credulous would swallow, yet much of what we tend to think about Mary Magdalene is equally unfounded. Rather than remembering her as the Apostle to the Apostles – the one who first proclaimed the good news of the resurrection and witnessed that miraculous event through which everything is changed – if we did one of those word association tests with Mary Magdalene we would probably respond with *prostitute*. That is how she has been and is remembered.

She is represented in Western art often as an alluring, sensuous woman, with long flowing hair. In contemporary pop culture she continues to capture the imagination in the role of seductress, think of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *the Last Temptation of Christ* as well as the Da Vinci Code, no doubt because it appeals to some to insinuate that the inner-company of Jesus was not quite as prim and proper as we've been led to believe. And so, Mary Magdalene's enduring impression is as a sinful whore, a woman oozing with sensuality, and an untamed and dangerous sexuality.

Well, as for Mary Magdalene herself, if she were still alive might consider pursuing defamation proceedings against a whole host of artists, writers, film producers and preachers, because there is in fact nothing in the Scriptures at all which suggests that Mary Magdalene was once a hooker. So where does this idea come from? Mary Magdalene the prostitute all stems from a case of mistaken identity,

which can be traced back to the difficulty of distinguishing the various Marys in the gospels. Putting to one side the other six Marys, Mary of Magdala, the anointing Mary, Mary of Bethany who also anointed Jesus, have all been muddled up.

The seeds of the idea that Mary Magdalene was a woman of fallen virtue were embedded by Pope Gregory the Great's confusion of her with the "sinful woman" in Luke's Gospel and Mary of Bethany in a sermon given in 591. What makes matters even more confusing is that nowhere at all is it even recorded that any of these women was a prostitute.

So does it really matter what we think about Mary Magdalene one way or the other?

In a word, yes. It matters that we understand and recognise the role of women in the early church, because so much affecting the participation of women in the life of the church has been predicated on assumptions about what went on in New Testament times. If we look at the history of the Church and read the Scriptures in such a way that discipleship and apostleship are narrowly construed, then we can end up drawing the conclusion that this was men's work. But if we can look through the accretions of history – misunderstandings, errors, legends, propaganda and an unsympathetic press – then we might see things quite differently.

Restoring Mary Magdalene's reputation, letting go of the characterisation of her as a *femme fatale*, we are left with something perhaps even more confronting: a woman who occupies a prominent place in the nascent Jesus movement; a woman who sticks with Jesus to the bitter end, unlike others, and keeps with him right through to

the dawn of resurrection and becomes a woman nothing less than the Apostle to the Apostles.

Some argue that Mary Magdalene's reputation was trashed by the patriarchy to detract from her status as a prominent disciple and member of the Jesus movement and a leader in the early church. Perhaps it was nothing more than confusion stemming from an innocent misunderstanding. Whatever the reason, sinister patriarchy at work à la Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, or honest mistake of a busy pope, what is clear, looking back over the last two millennia, is that there has been a prevailing tendency to view women in two archetypal forms: as either passive models of piety and virginal purity, such as the Blessed Virgin Mary, or as wild, dangerous whores, like Mary Magdalene: saint or sinner. This has had a detrimental effect on how women have been seen and treated in the church across the centuries and has robbed the church of the exercise of the significant gifts of so many faithful women. The radical role of women in the public ministry of Jesus has been downplayed and overlooked and this remains the case except in some pockets of the Church today.

One of the most striking things about Jesus's ministry and the movement that he inaugurated, was the status it ascribed to women. Jesus's interactions with women are well-recorded in the Scriptures. They challenge the assumptions and propriety of the day. We see too in the ministry of St Paul that, despite a couple of his utterances in the epistles, women were key partners and supporters in his mission and endeavours. Yet there seems to have been a certain wilful blindness about this, with the patriarchal status of men persisting and ultimately dominating the life of the community of faith.

We see the whitewashing of the role of women in the church all about us, in the Roman and Orthodox churches as well as in many Protestant

churches and within corners of the Anglican Church, where the roles women are allowed to play in the life of the church, liturgically or otherwise, are highly restricted. On the basis of a very narrow notion of discipleship and apostleship, and a couple of passages of Scripture read in a manner that is not fully engaged with the contingencies of their contexts and other practices of the time, women continue to be designated to lesser and limited roles in the church. That this happens to women, it is no surprise that minorities have been treated so harshly.

The slandering of Mary Magdalene's reputation over so many centuries shows how easy it is to let assumptions and gossip shape the way we think about people, turning them into two dimensional characters so that we can control or delegitimise them to suit our own convenience, so we need not be challenged or disturbed by them. Mary Magdalene, fallen woman of the streets, temptress and seductress, is much more manageable and less challenging than Mary Magdalene, woman of means, substance and leadership, faithful disciple, and apostle. One slip up in a speech contributed to around 1500 years worth of misunderstanding. Mary Magdalene's case of mistaken identity reminds us of the power and long lasting effects of gossip, character assassination and misunderstanding. Too often we can find ourselves pontificating on subjects or amateurly psychoanalysing others without really knowing what we're talking about. Those with whom we disagree, whom we don't like or those we find irritating and difficult, are so easily squashed into two dimensional figures in our minds, nothing more than tokens of what we find unappealing, objectionable or irksome about them. The treatment of Mary Magdalene over the centuries is a lesson for us that to look at others through the narrow lens of our prejudices and ignorance leaves us the poorer. Sifting through our assumptions, presumptions, prejudices and insecurities, being open to the gift they

offer us, even, and perhaps especially, if it challenges and confronts us.