

5th Sunday of Great Lent 2012

Today, we commemorate our Mother among the Saints Mary of Egypt

When Mary was only twelve years old, she left her parents and departed to Alexandria, where she lived a depraved life for seventeen years. Then, moved by curiosity, she went with many pilgrims to Jerusalem, that she might see the Exaltation of the venerable Cross. Even in the Holy City she gave herself over to every kind of licentiousness and drew many into the depth of perdition. Desiring to go into the church on the day of the Exaltation of the Cross, time and again she perceived a certain invisible power preventing her entrance, whereas the multitude of people about her entered unhindered. Therefore, wounded in heart by this, she decided to change her way of life and reconcile herself to God by means of repentance. Invoking our Lady the Theotokos as her protectress, she asked her to open the way for her to worship the Cross, and vowed that she would renounce the world. And thus, returning once again to the church, she entered easily. When she had worshipped the precious Wood, she departed that same day from Jerusalem and passed over the Jordan. She went into the inner wilderness and for forty-seven years lived a most harsh manner of life, surpassing human strength; alone, she prayed to God alone. Toward the end of her life, she met a certain hermit named Zosimas, and she related to him her life from the beginning. She requested of him to bring her the immaculate Mysteries that she might partake of them. According to her request, he did this the following year on Holy and Great Thursday. One year after this, Zosimas again went thither and found her dead, laid upon the ground, and letters written in the sand near her which said: "Abba Zosimas, bury here the body of wretched Mary. I died on the very day I partook of the immaculate Mysteries. Pray for me." Her death is reckoned by some to have taken place in 378, by some, in 437, and by others, in 522. She is commemorated also on the Fifth Sunday of Great Lent. Her life was recorded by Saint Sophronius of Jerusalem

~ From http://goarch.org/chapel/saints_view?contentid=2&type=saints&date=4/1/2012&D=S

Today's Sermon

The Fifth Sunday of Great Lent is the last Sunday of Great Lent. The Great Fast will be finished this Friday. Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday and Holy Week are just around the corner, with the period of fasting intensifying on these days as we approach Pascha. As we approach the end of the Fast, the Orthodox Church offers many lessons to the faithful this Sunday.

The Epistle reading (from **Hebrews 9:11-14**) describes how the people of God offered sacrifices to the Lord during Old Testament times. St. Paul reminds the reader, though, that Jesus Christ is the Great High Priest (ο Μέγας Αρχιερέας). His sacrifice – dying for all of humanity on the Cross – was the greatest and last sacrifice that needed to be made to purify us and offer us “eternal redemption”. The Gospel reading (found in **Mark 10:32-45**) has Jesus talking to the disciples about His upcoming Passion, Death and Resurrection. He continues to describe how true greatness and “being first” is for one to become the servant and slave of all. Humility – not pride – will give one the opportunity to enter the Kingdom of God. These thoughts bring us to today’s Saint we commemorate.

St. Mary of Egypt is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on both the Fifth Sunday of Lent and April 1st) is such an amazing example for all of us. Her life teaches us three main lessons:

(i) God respects our freedom: As a teenager, St. Mary was not a “model Christian” in any respect. From 12 years of age, she left her home and lived a life full of sin. She didn’t merely steal or cheat – she was a *prostitute*. Human trafficking is such a deplorable act that is practiced in certain parts of the world – can we imagine how things were at that time? She lived the life of a prostitute for seventeen years, from 12 to 29 years of age.

If God wanted to, He could have made her stop her sinful ways and repent. If God wants to, He can make *us* do the same. Yet, God has given us the freedom to do *what we want*. He tells us in

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the Gospels, "Whoever wishes...let him follow Me." He does not say, "Want to or not, you have to!" This is the magnificence and love of God. Yet, that same love does not allow people to live in sin forever: there will be times that, through struggles and tribulations, we will see that He is there, waiting for us to take His hand.

(ii) God will *never* abandon us, even though we might go through struggles and tribulations:

When St. Mary was 29, she boarded a ship to go to Jerusalem and visit the Tomb of Christ, the Holy Sepulchre, and to venerate the Cross of Christ. As she tried to enter, God worked His miracle: a force, one she identified as God Himself, kept her out of the Church. She realized this was done to help her come to her senses and *change her mind* about life– to *repent*. She confessed her sins and went to the desert for 47 years, asking forgiveness from God every day for her former lifestyle and struggled with her passions for those years.

We, too, go through different struggles: of faith, health, family, relationships, death and so much more. Yet, God accompanies us on the journey! He is there waiting to take our hand and be with us – all we have to do is let Him guide the way. If we do not abandon Him, the struggles that are given to us might be for our benefit – but the rewards are also so much greater.

(iii) God wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth: At the end of her life, St. Mary was visited by St. Zosimas, a priest. Although their meeting was very interesting, filled with lots of miraculous signs and wonders, the most important part happened when she confessed and received Holy Communion – the first time since she had been in the desert. They made a deal: they would meet again next year at the same place. In one year, St. Zosimas arrived to the same place to see that St. Mary had died. In the sand of the desert (which does not usually keep one's writing past a few seconds) was written a message from St. Mary, saying that she passed away the same day he went to give her Holy Communion. St. Mary found salvation and is glorified with the Lord in Heaven forever because she truly did come to the knowledge of the Truth – no matter how "late" in her life she did.

For anyone, there is no "too late" in life to repent and join Christ; however, we can't base our repentance on the "deathbed confession". Why? Well, *no one knows* when they will pass away, and that is why we should be ready always to meet Christ and repent always. Our salvation begins at baptism, continues throughout our life (with the help of the Sacraments, especially those of Repentance/Confession and Holy Communion) and will culminate on the Final Day, when the Lord will come to judge the living and the dead and whose Kingdom will have no end.

St. Mary never waited for the Bridegroom to come "in the midst of the night" for her to repent. We, as Christians, should not wait for "the end" to repent. If there's a new game or software out there, we usually line up to get it. If we don't, there's always the danger someone will tell us, "we ran out, come back next time". Do we want to hear these words – "the door for the Feast has closed" – when it comes to our salvation?

Holy Week approaches – let the Bridegroom Christ come into our hearts. It's never too late to make Him the Centre of our lives and to live a life of repentance – now and forevermore. Amen!

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Discussion Questions:

For Children

1. Who was St. Mary of Egypt?
2. What are the lessons of the Epistle and Gospel reading? What are the 3 lessons of St. Mary's life?
3. Who was St. Zosimas? Why is he so important to St. Mary of Egypt's story?

For Youth/Young Adults

1. Human trafficking is a very important issue in today's society. What are some ways you can bring attention to this?
2. Why do you think St. Mary of Egypt left her house at 12 years of age? Do you think it was "all her fault"? (*Note: The Synaxarion – book of the Lives of the Saints – doesn't tell us why she left*)
3. Why is this Saint picked for the last Sunday before Palm Sunday? Is her example one you would expect to find during Lent?
4. If you could speak to St. Mary of Egypt when she just repented in Jerusalem, what advice would you give her?