

April 5, 2020 Fifth Sunday of Great Fast

St Mary of Egypt

On the Fifth Sunday of Lent the Orthodox Church commemorates our Righteous Mother Mary of Egypt due to her recognition by the Church as a model of repentance.



Our holy mother Mary was born in Egypt. She had left her parents at the age of twelve to go to Alexandria, where she spent the next seventeen years in debauchery and the greatest profligacy. Living on charity and linen-weaving, she nevertheless offered her body to any man, not being forced to it by dire necessity as were so many poor women, but as though she were .

consumed by the fire of a desire that nothing was able to appease.

One day, seeing a crowd of Lybians and Egyptians moving towards the port, she followed them and set sail with them for Jerusalem, offering her body to pay her fare. When they arrived in the Holy City, she followed the crowd that was thronging towards the Church of the Resurrection, it being the day of the Exaltation of the Cross. But, when she reached the threshold of the church, an invisible force prevented her entering in spite of repeated efforts on her part, although the other pilgrims were able to go in without hindrance. Left alone in a corner of the narthex, she began to realize that it was the impurity of her life that was preventing her approaching the holy Wood. She burst into tears and smote her breast and, seeing an icon of the Mother of God, made this prayer to her: "O Sovereign Lady, who didst bear God in the flesh, I know that I should not dare to look upon thine icon, thou who are pure in soul and body, because, debauched as I am, I must fill thee with disgust. But, as the God born of thee became man in order to call sinners to repentance, come to my aid! Allow me to go into the church and prostrate before His Cross. And, as soon as I have seen the Cross, I promise that I will renounce the world and all pleasures, and follow the path of salvation that thou wilt show me."

She felt herself suddenly freed from the power that had held her and was able to enter the church. There she fervently venerated the Holy Cross and then, returning to the icon of the Mother of God, declared herself ready to follow the path that the Virgin would show her. A voice replied to her from on high: "If you cross the Jordan, you will find rest."

Leaving the church, she bought three loaves with the alms a pilgrim had given her, discovered which road led to the Jordan and arrived one evening at the Church of Saint John the Baptist. After having washed in the river, she received Communion in the Holy Mysteries, ate half of one of the loaves and went to sleep on the riverbank. The next morning, she crossed the river and lived from that time on in the desert, remaining there for forty-seven years without ever encountering either another human being or any animal.

During the first seventeen years, her clothes soon having fallen into rags, burning with heat by day and shivering with cold by night, she fed on herbs and wild roots. But more than the physical trials, she had to face violent assaults from the passions and the memory of her sins and, throwing herself on the ground, she implored the Mother of God to come to her aid. Protected by God, who desires nothing but that the sinner should turn to Him and live, she uprooted all the passions from her heart and was able to turn the fire of carnal desire into a flame of divine love that made it possible for her to endure the implacable desert with joy, as though she were not in the flesh.



At the urging of the monk, who was transported at having at last met a God-bearing being who had attained the perfection of monastic life, the

Saint recounted to him with tears the story of her life and conversion. Then, having finished her account, she begged him to come the following year to the bank of the Jordan with Holy Communion.

When the day arrived, Zosimas saw Mary appearing on the further bank of the river. She made the sign of the Cross and crossed the Jordan, walking on the water. Having received Holy Communion weeping, she said: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation" (Luke 2:29). She then took leave of Zosimas, asking him to meet her the following year in the place where they had first met.



When the year was past, Zosimas, going to the agreed spot, found the Saint's body stretched on the ground, her arms crossed and her face turned towards the East. His tearful emotion prevented him from noticing at once an inscription traced on the ground by the Saint, which read: "Abba Zosimas, bury here the body of the humble Mary; give what is of dust to dust, after having prayed for me. I died on the very night of the Passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, after having partaken in the Holy Eucharist." Consoled in his grief by having learned the Saint's name, Zosimas was amazed to discover that she had, in several hours, covered a distance of more than twenty days' march.

After having vainly tried to break up the earth with a stick, he suddenly saw a lion approaching

Mary's body and licking her feet. On the orders of the Elder, the beast dug a hole with its claws, in which Zosimas devoutly placed the Saint's body.

On his return to the monastery, he recounted the marvels that God had wrought for those who turn away from sin and move towards Him with all their hearts. From the hardened sinner that she had been, Mary has, for a great many souls crushed under the burden of sin, become a source of hope and a model of conversion. This is why the Holy Fathers have placed the celebration of her memory at the end of the Great Fast as an encouragement for all who have neglected their salvation, proclaiming that repentance can bring them back to God even at the eleventh hour.

Kondak: Fourth Tone

Having escaped the gloom of sin, O blest Mary, and shining brightly with the light of repentance, thou didst present thy heart to Christ, O glorious one, bringing Him His Holy and all-immaculate Mother as a greatly merciful and most bold intercessor. Hence, thou hast found the pardon of thy sins and with the Angels rejoicest for evermore.

The Life of St Mary teaches us many things. Perhaps the first and most obvious lesson we can learn from her is that we should never judge, never pre-judge. Who will be saved? It is impossible to answer this question, for it is never too late to repent, even for us. Humanly speaking, when we consider the life of Mary until her twenty-ninth year, we might think that salvation had become impossible for her. And yet the service to her calls her 'the greatest of saints'. Humanly speaking, we are condemned; but by the grace of God everything, including the height of repentance, is possible. Indeed, as we have already said, the Church calls St Mary 'the greatest of saints'.

And as this last week of Great Lent begins, let us also ponder on the words of the Mother of God, which led Mary to her salvation through repentance and her greatness: 'If you cross the Jordan, you will find true peace'. These mysterious words are today also addressed to each of us; the interpretation of their mystery is open to the souls of each of us, but only if we ask the Mother of God and St Mary to guide us. And then we shall find our own 'entry into Jerusalem'.

Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for us! Amen. <http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/sermmoeg.htm>

Hope, Gratitude and Solidarity

A Message to Canadians from Religious Leaders in Canada in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

“In spite of present sufferings, which can seem overwhelming at times, the flames of hope cannot be extinguished. Love, which gives life its fullest meaning, continues to seek out the common good in spite of individual difficulties.”

“We urge all people in Canada to listen and follow attentively the directions of our Public Health officials and government leaders. We, as religious leaders, pledge to lead by example. We all must act together in confronting this virus. While everyone is vulnerable during this crisis, let us not forget those in our society who, prior to COVID-19, were already vulnerable to health and social ailments. As religious leaders, we raise our collective voices to highlight the necessity for greater attention to the needs of the homeless, the incarcerated, the elderly and those already suffering from social isolation. We remember too those people, especially women and children who face abuse and violence, who are not safe at home and may suffer additional abuse and violence as stress increases.”

“We earnestly pray for healing, for the continued efforts to relieve human suffering, and for perseverance throughout these challenging times. As history records these moments for our country’s future, let us pray that, in the face of COVID-19, we respond with an abundance of hope, gratitude and solidarity, trusting in the loving and ever merciful God, the source of all hope.”