

Sermon Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt

Heb 9:11–14, Gal 3: 23–29; Mark 10:32–45, Luke 7: 36–50

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST !!!

Today the Church sets before us two spiritual athletes: One, a monk battling his own spiritual pride, and the other, an addict. St. Zosimos was an ascetic who was tempted by pride: He was a good enough monk that he knew the danger of it, and asked God for help. God sent him to the monastery of St. Savas the Sanctified. The other – St. Mary of Egypt: A great sinner, and a great saint. They represent the sort of temptation we face during this time of Great Lent, but also in our life in general. She faced a life of temptation to gluttony, drunkenness, and physical lust. He faced a life of temptation to vainglory, pride, self conceit, and hypocrisy.

St Mary's life brings to us a multitude of questions. She was not a prostitute. To call her such would be an insult to the prostitutes of Alexandria in that day. They despised her and considered her to be an immoral woman. St. Mary was a sex addict and an alcoholic. These were the passions that ruled her life.

And what we know today of addiction is that it has components that feed it: Lack of connection or isolation, shame, and usually trauma of some kind, often from childhood. St. Mary tells us that she left home at 12. That is alarming enough for us to consider today. In the sixth century it was even more so very unusual for a

young lady of 12 to leave her home and go to the big city. The question hangs heavy over the narrative that she is telling St. Zossimos. We don't really know what prompted her leaving home. She doesn't tell us. It is problematic to speculate. And it may be that this information was withheld so that we, who hear this account centuries later, might not somehow minimize her self-destructive life. But something happened. She only tells us that she renounced her parents' love.

Whatever event it was, or possibly recurring events, St. Mary goes off to the big city. We can imagine what happens to a 12 year old girl alone in the big city, and it happens to Mary; and she begins to act out sexually. She has no connection there and no one to connect with. She follows a life of sexual excess, trying to use her physical body to bridge that isolation. She substitutes sex for love and intimacy. She commits shameful acts and then uses more shameful acts to try and forget her shame. She is isolated even from the bottom most part of Alexandrian society, and though she keeps trying the same solution to her isolation and shame, it only results in more isolation and shame, and to deflect her shame, she became shameless. . . . And she tells us that she drank quite a lot of wine. She lived a life devoid of any healthy boundaries.

She was a victim to passions that were inflicted upon her, and a victim of her own passions, which she let rule her for 17 years. . . . Then someone mentions one fall that the Exaltation of the Cross will be celebrated in Jerusalem shortly. We don't know exactly what about the Cross touched in her, but somehow it did; somehow it spoke to the depth of her, and she decided to go.

Often when we move towards God, that which is keeping us from Him gets louder. She used more debauchery to secure her passage even to the point of forcing herself on the sailors – a behaviour that suggests that somewhere along the way, that she had been forced. As with most addictions, it eventually takes more to get the same buzz, to get the same forgetting. But nothing she did could fill the emptiness inside her. Nothing provided the real intimacy that her soul sought.

On the day of the Exaltation of the Cross she attempted to enter with the crowd, but she could not. Something was preventing her, whether a spiritual army or being paralyzed by her own shame, she could not proceed. After several more attempts she finds herself on the porch, unable to go further. She is confronted with a profound absence. And in it, she begins to see her own self abandonment. And slowly it begins to dawn on her why she cannot proceed; and as with the Prodigal Son, she comes to herself. She comes upon an icon of the Theotokos and weeps before it realizing the depths of her wounds and impurity before the pure one. And a space of repentance is created for her. The love of God and the Theotokos warms her heart and her soul in all the ways she had been seeking in the wrong ways. She promises that she will go wherever the Theotokos leads her if she will be permitted to venerate the precious cross of Her Son. And the way is made for her to come into the Church of the Resurrection and to fall before the Holy Cross and kiss it. She was granted a new desire – a desire for the Cross.

Then she goes back to the icon and asks for instruction. And she is told to go to the desert across the Jordan. After taking the Holy Mysteries, she enters a different kind of isolation, one from

which she cannot hide herself. For 17 years she struggled in the desert, one year for each she spent in debauchery. For 17 years she and wrestled with her thoughts and desires and her wounds and even demonic attacks, until she found peace.

And so the Church puts St. Mary before us. This is what repentance looks like. Her story asks questions of us: What are we addicted to? Alcohol? Raging (as was St Paul when he first became a Christian)? Gambling? Internet? Being right? Pornography? Our own ego? Are we addicted to Chaos? What boundaries of our own and of others have we violated seeking to fill that emptiness? When we try to move towards God, it feels like a sickness. We are unaccustomed to peace. For us it feels like a sickness, like a disease that we must cure by applying more chaos, and more of our addiction.

Although the dynamics of it may not be quite as intense as it was for St. Mary, the dynamics are still there. What shame are we avoiding? How are we using behaviours or substances to avoid looking at ourselves and our own deep loneliness? What wounds do we have that feed all this? In our shame we cannot move Godward — St. Mary couldn't — and we, like her medicate our shame with more of the same.

Brothers and Sisters, our Lord wants to heal these in us. The Lord wants to take the poisonous parts of shame away from us. The Lord wants to fill up our loneliness with Himself. . . And we are often our own worst enemy:

We will sing at Vespers tomorrow: I have rived in foolishness the rich man who showed no love for others; overwhelmed by

sensual pleasures and the passions, I live in luxury and self-indulgence. I see my mind, O Lord, lying always like Lazarus before the gates of repentance, but with indifference I pass it by, and leave it hungry, sick and wounded by the passions. Therefore I deserve to be condemned to the flames of Gehenna: but deliver me from them, O Master, for Thou alone art rich in mercy.
(Vespers, Monday of the 6th week)

We starve ourselves spiritually while indulging ourselves and the noise of our culture. As the hymn from the vigil said, we have not attained the virtue of the pharisee, nor the repentance of the sinful woman. We neglect our own mind when it seeks spiritual nourishment.

When we are proud, as St. Zossimos was getting perilously close to, we miss the Lord of the Universe. When we humble ourselves, even as St. Mary did, we are filled with the very thing we have been using our addictions to get, and that our addictions have prevented us from getting. But though we cannot move Godward, God has taken our flesh and come to us to heal us.

Through the power of God we can change our life, whether we are a seasoned ascetic or a broken addict. But it must be through God's power. If we attempt on our own, we will reap frustration, and more shame. We must also have a listening and humble heart. Zossimos did not expect to be instructed in the faith by an addict, yet he was.

And as Zossimos headed back to the monastery of St Savas the Sanctified, so we are also in the home stretch. The hymns ask us, this week to notice how we starve ourselves spiritually, as the rich

man starved Lazarus. At the end of this week we will hear in the hymns to assemble ourselves. Jesus also is in a journey – a journey towards Jerusalem where He will confront and defeat death. He comes to heal the sick and raise up Lazarus from the dead. Jesus comes to be received by His people and then be betrayed by them. Christ our God comes to His Passion for our sakes. Let us journey with Him; and so let us find in Him the healing of our passions.

To Whom be all glory, honour and worship, now and ever and unto ages of ages.