

MARY OF EGYPT: STUDY 1

“A Real Life Parable”

St Mary of Egypt: Background

St. Mary died in 522 AD. St. Sophronius, (560- 638 AD) the Patriarch of Jerusalem was a prolific writer and hymnographer. He authored the prayers for the Great Blessing of the Waters. When he heard the story of St. Mary of Egypt he wrote it down and shared it. St. Andrew of Crete (composer of the Great Canon) heard the story and brought it with him to the 6th Ecumenical Council in 680 AD and from there its popularity spread.

St. Mary of Egypt feast is April 1 - the 4th Sunday is dedicated to St John of the Ladder the model of ascetics, the 5th and last Sunday is dedicated To St. Mary of Egypt the model of penitents.

The Great Penitential Canon of St. Andrew of Crete

It is divided into four parts and read during the first four nights of Great Lent within the Great Compline Service.

“It can best be described as a penitential lamentation conveying to us the scope and depth of sin, shaking the soul with despair, repentance, and hope...the events of sacred history (Adam and Eve, Paradise and Fall, Noah and the Flood, David, the Promised Land etc.) are revealed as events of my life...the tragedy of sin and betrayal as *my* personal tragedy...sin is, first of all, man’s fall from an incredibly high altitude, the rejection of man of his ‘high calling’...It is precisely the function and purpose of the *Great Canon* to reveal sin to us and to lead us thus to repentance. (Schmemmann, Great Lent, pg. 64).”

“*Have mercy on me O God, have mercy upon me* – the Great Canon forms a prolonged confession of sins, an unremitting call to repentance (Met. Kallistos Ware, Lenten Triodion, p. 50).”

The *Great Canon* is done in its entirety on **Thursday of the 5th week of Lent** along with the reading of the life of St. Mary of Egypt.

“If at the beginning (of Lent) we merely listened to it, now hopefully its words have become our words, our lamentation, our hope and repentance, and also an evaluation of our Lenten effort: how much of all this has become truly ours? (Schmemmann, Great Lent, p. 78).”

- “*Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for us. Give me the light of Grace, from God’s providence on high that I may flee from the darkness of the passions and sing fervently the joyful story of your life, O Mary.*” (*Great Canon*).”

The Fifth and Last Sunday of Great Lent – Going Up To Jerusalem

Originally the last Sunday of Great Lent was dedicated to the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) by the end of the 14th C. it was assigned to Mary of Egypt. The Canon of Matins is based upon the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

“The tone of the Lenten services changes. If throughout the first part of Lent our effort was aimed at our own purification, we are made to realize now that that this purification was not an end in itself but must lead to the contemplation and comprehension and appropriation of the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection...as participation in that mystery...(Schmemmann, Great Lent, p. 78).”

Epistle Reading: Hebrews 9:11-14 – The Cross purifies the conscience

Christ appeared as a high priest...taking...his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption...who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Gospel Reading: Mark 10:32-45

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise."...And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized...But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Joseph the Chaste – overcoming the temptation of Potiphar’s wife, the *Egyptian Women* (Gen. 39-40)

“...both Joseph (Potiphar’s wife & Dungeon) and Jesus (tempted in the wilderness by the devil & taking up the Cross) were tempted with two kinds of temptations, pleasurable and painful, and both through self-restraint and patient endurance, emerged victorious...(Eugen Pentiuic, Hearing the Scriptures p. 54).”

“Only Christ was able to break entirely this cycle (enslavement to the pleasures of sins and, sins entered into because of choosing not to endure painful circumstances, *crosses*.) Christ ... assumed human nature (without sinning, thus not subject to death, death is a choice for Christ) with a capacity for *suffering* (subject to both pain and pleasure)...evil forces lurking within human nature (through its capacity for hunger and pain) tried to tempt Jesus to sin. In resisting these two types of temptation (*pleasurable* in the wilderness and *painful* at the time of the Passion) Christ succeeded in healing and liberating humanity from the bondage of sin...If those baptized in Christ can and do sin ...(it is) because they are not fully reborn to the new life in the Holy Spirit.” (Eugen Pentiuic, Hearing the Scriptures p. 339)

“Let those of us who have wisely finished the course of fasting and who celebrate with love the beginning of the suffering of the Passion of the Lord, Let us all, my brothers, zealously imitate the purity of self-controlled Joseph...Let us dry up through alms-giving, the sweetness of passion... (Romanos, Kontakion).”

A Map of Repentance

Zosimas – seeking self-knowledge, wanting to progress,

"Is there a monk on earth who can be of use to me and show me a kind of asceticism that I have not accomplished? Is there a man to be found in the desert who has surpassed me?" Thus thought the elder, when suddenly an angel appeared to him and said: "Zosimas, valiantly have you struggled, as far as this is within the power of man...But there is no man who has attained perfection. Before you lie unknown struggles greater than those you have already accomplished. That you may know how many other ways lead to salvation, leave your native land like the renowned patriarch Abraham and go to the monastery by the River Jordan."

“The holy Zosimas was struck with amazement, O Mother, beholding in you a wonder truly strange and new. For he saw an angel in the body and was filled with astonishment, praising Christ unto all ages (Great Canon).”

Conscience prevented her entry – the beginning

“We need not imagine a miraculous force preventing her from crossing the threshold; the force was probably - certainly - within herself. She felt that the realm was too sacred, and the person of the Mother of God too holy for her to dare walk into her presence and stand in the precincts of the church.

(Met. Anthony Bloom).”

“The pollution of past sins prevented you from entering the church to see the elevation of the Holy Cross; but then your conscience and awareness of your actions turned you, O wise in God, to a better way of life. (Vespers of 5th Sunday of Lent).”

“Raising your cry to the pure Mother of God, you have driven back the fury of the passions that violently assailed you, and put to shame the enemy, who sought to make you stumble. But give your help in trouble now to me, your servant (Great Canon).”

“He who you have loved, O Mother, whom you have desired, in whose footsteps you have followed: He it is that found you and gave you repentance, for He is God compassionate. Pray to Him without ceasing, that we may be delivered from passions and distress (Great Canon).”

Determination and Repentance

“She can teach us something very great. As Saint Seraphim of Sarov repeated more than once to those who came to see him, the difference between a sinner who is lost and a sinner who finds his way to salvation lies in nothing but determination. The grace of God is always there; but our response is not. But Mary responded; through the horror of her new perception of herself she responded to the holiness, the grace the wholeness and sanctity of the Mother of God, and nothing, nothing was too much for her to change her life (Met. Anthony Bloom).”

“Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for us. You were brought down into an abyss of great iniquity, yet not held fast within it: but with better intent you have mounted through action to the height of virtue, past all expectation; and the angels, O Mary were amazed at you.” (Great Canon).”

Crossing the Jordan – a symbol of the Way to freedom from sin – And the transferring of authority (John to Jesus) – A Life dominated by sin to a life of Grace – New Creation as a baptism into Christ

“Crossing the stream of Jordan, you have found peace, escaping from the deadening pleasures of the flesh. Deliver us also from them, holy Mary, by your intercessions.”

“Through the perfection of your earthly life, O Mother, you have gained a heavenly freedom from the sinfulness of passion. In your intercessions pray that this same freedom may be given to those who sing your praises.”

Repentance as the Way of Life

“Year after year, in fasting and prayer, in the scorching heat, in the desperate aloneness of the desert she fought all the evil that had accumulated in her soul; because it is not enough, to become aware of the evil, it is not enough even to reject it in an act of will, it is there, in our memories, in our desires, in our frailty, in the rottenness which evil brings. She had to fight for her whole life, but at the end of that life she had conquered; indeed, she had fought the good fight, she had become pure of stain, she could enter the realm of God: not a temple, not a place but eternity (Met. Anthony Bloom).”

It takes a life-time of Repentance to undo a life-time of sin

From the time she was twelve until she was twenty-nine, she immersed herself in satisfying sensual passions. It would take her the next seventeen years, living alone in the desert of Jordan, until she was forty-six years old, before she began to have freedom from her past sins. When Fr. Zosimos met her, she was 79 years old, levitating while in prayer, walking across the Jordan river, quoting scripture without ever reading the bible and clairvoyant. She knew Fr. Zosimos by name before he said anything to her.