

## St. Mary of Egypt

"For the mystery of the Incarnation of God is the salvation of the whole of Creation."

~ *St. Ambrose of Milan (c 339-397)*

You will have noted that the second, fourth and fifth of the Lenten Sundays are each dedicated to the memory of a particular saint – the second Sunday, St Gregory Palamas; the fourth, St John K limakos; and today, the fifth Sunday, recalls Saint Mary of Egypt. Almost nothing is known of her early life other than she was born somewhere in Egypt, round about AD 344. Not yet a teenager, she ran off to Alexandria where she lived by begging, and she eventually became a prostitute. In her late twenties she travelled to Jerusalem hoping to find more clients for her “profession” which, in the Holy City, she continued to practise for a short time. One day she attempted to enter the Church of the Resurrection (The Holy Sepulchre) probably at the Feast of the Holy Cross. However, an invisible force held her back, rendering her immobile. She realised that she was being prevented from entering the sacred precinct because of her impurity, her wretched sinfulness. As she looked around she saw outside the Church an icon of the Theotokos, the Blessed Virgin Mary. At that moment there occurred a conversion which is still celebrated today - some seventeen hundred years later! She prayed for forgiveness, making a vow to become a penitent and a hermit. Her mobility was restored, and she entered the Church. After venerating the relic of the True Cross, she heard a voice say, “If you journey beyond the Jordan you will find glorious rest and true peace.” She went immediately to the Monastery of St John the Baptist at the River Jordan and there made her confession, received absolution and took Holy Communion. The very next day, she left for the desert wilderness, taking only three loaves of bread – when these were finished, she lived on whatever she could find. In this way, she remained for the rest of her life.

One day, in the desert, about a year before she died, she encountered St Zosimas of Palestine, a hermit at the Jordan. After her years in the wilderness, she was completely naked and almost unrecognisable as a human being! She called out to him to throw her his cloak; she covered herself with it, and then related to him her life’s story. Mary asked this holy monk-hermit to meet her at the Jordan on the Holy Thursday of the next year, and to bring her Holy Communion. When, the next year, Zosimas brought the Divine Eucharist to the banks of the Jordan, to receive the Blessed Mystery, she crossed the River, walking on the water! After her Communion, she asked Zosimas to come the next year.

This Zosimas did. However, as he drew near to their agreed meeting place he could see something or someone lying on the ground. He realised it was Mary already dead. An inscription in the sand beside her corpse said that she had died the very night he had last brought Holy Communion to her. Her body was incorrupt and had been miraculously carried to that place. Zosimas immediately began to dig a grave, and in this task he was assisted by a lion!

Zosimas quickly returned to the monastery where he related to the monks all that had happened. This was preserved amongst them as an oral history until it was later written down by St Sophronius.

In this most touching account of the life and conversion of St Mary of Egypt there is much for us to consider –

1. Mary was a habitual sinner. Indeed, she earned her living from sin. No one is too far gone so as to be beyond the Grace of God.
2. Her conversion was truly a grace, a freely given gift. It came to her in a moment. We do not necessarily have to struggle – but we have to be open to God’s grace, to his work within us.
3. The moment of conversion is not always an unseen incident but is often in some way linked to others. In Mary’s case the restoration of movement, the second sign of her conversion, came after she saw the icon, the image, the presence, of the Theotokos.
4. Mary’s sinfulness prevented her from entering the Church of the Resurrection. How often do we enter the church without as much as a thought given to our spiritual uncleanness?
5. Immediately after her conversion experience, Mary completed her *metanoia*, her re-turn to God, by making a good and heartfelt confession. Shortly after, she sealed that confession with Holy Communion. What is our response to the call to conversion?
6. Having made her confession, Mary entered a life of penance. How often do we forget to complete the penance given to us at confession, or rush through it or not give it our greatest attention?

During Lent, there has been a powerful but often neglected theme – the Return to Paradise. As a sign of the right cosmic order, we have abstained from animal products, especially anything which has involved the killing or discomforting of other sentient beings who share this world with us. There are no cages in Paradise.

It is no accident that a lion, a much feared wild beast, humbly assists St Zosimas in digging the grave of St Mary. This and many other incidents taken from the lives of the Saints, East and West, tell us that there is a bond between all living things, and that although disturbed in this fallen world, it will be restored on the Last Day. If we seek a spirituality of ecology many of the Fathers (and Mothers!) can provide it – we have but to consider the lives of such well known saints as Francis of Assisi, Seraphim of Sarov, Gertrude of Nivelles, and recently, Paisios of Mt Athos.

Our Lenten journey, with its fast and abstinence, with its call to look beyond the present, is a sign of that which is to come; and not simply the Easter of this year, but the *fulfilment* of Pascha, the Glorious Return of the Lord – that day which will inaugurate the eternal Pascha, that unceasing passing from glory to glory.

Indeed, let our Lenten prayer ever be *maran ’âtha*’ – Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev 22:20)

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