



## St. Mary of Egypt: A Profile in Courage for the Fifth Sunday of Great Lent in the Orthodox Church

We sometimes forget that it takes a particular kind of courage to accept the truth about ourselves, especially when that truth is painful or requires something of us that we do not want to give. No one can force us to make true spiritual changes in our lives, so all the more do we need the clarity and fortitude to recognize and respond to the truth.

Today we remember St. Mary of Egypt for having the courage to acknowledge the obscene mess she had become and then to do what it took to set things right. When an invisible force prevented her from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, she asked for the help of the Theotokos, entered the church to venerate the Holy Cross, and obeyed a divine command to spend the rest of her life in repentance and strict asceticism as a hermit in the desert. When the monk Zosima stumbled upon her almost 50 years later, he was amazed at her holiness. But like all the saints, she was aware only of her sins and her ongoing need for God's mercy.

Much less attuned to the truth about themselves were the disciples James and John when they asked to have privileged places of power in the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The Lord had just told the disciples that He would suffer, die, and rise again, but these two continued to think in worldly terms of a political kingdom on this earth and were grasping for power. The Savior corrected them by saying that they did not know what they were asking, for the way of His Kingdom requires making a selfless offering of oneself to God, drinking the cup and undergoing the baptism of suffering and death. This is the way of Christ, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

It takes deep spiritual courage to confront the truth that we have been living in ways contrary to God's will. It was not easy for power-hungry disciples to give up their dreams of political success and learn how to follow a Lord Who brings salvation to the world through His cross and empty tomb. It was not easy for a grossly immoral person like St. Mary of Egypt to renounce her comfortable and pleasure-filled life in order to repent in the desert. And it is not easy for any of us to recognize the truth about our own failings, weaknesses, and habits of word, thought, and deed that have put roadblocks on our pathway to holiness.

It takes a particular kind of courage to do so, but we must undertake the hard work of opening the eyes of our souls to reality and taking the steps that are necessary for us to participate personally in Christ's healing and strength. Of course, we never earn or deserve the Lord's mercy, but we must cooperate with Him by recognizing what we have done to ourselves and repenting in humility as best we can. He enables us all to do that; and the more humbly we repent, the more we open ourselves to His grace and transforming power.

A Church that makes great saints out of former prostitutes, murderers, and adulterers is both realistic about the corruption of our lives and optimistic that there is hope for every one of us to set things right and live faithfully because of the mercy of Jesus Christ. But we must have the courage to recognize honestly our brokenness, sickness, and imperfection, and then have the fortitude to take the often painful steps that are necessary to reorient our lives toward the Kingdom. We may not have to spend fifty years in the desert like St. Mary of Egypt or be corrected face-to-face like James and John were by the Lord, but like them we must have the humble strength necessary to recognize the tension between our present spiritual sickness



and the goal of the blessed life to which we are called. It is in that tension and struggle that we will find our salvation if we have the courage to accept the truth about ourselves and then do what we must in order to turn things around by participating more fully in the life of Christ.

As we stand near the end of Great Lent, we have all learned at least something about our spiritual state. Perhaps we have wrestled with our passions and they have gotten the better of us. Perhaps we have not even tried to pray, fast or otherwise deny ourselves, or become more generous to the needy. Maybe we have not really pursued forgiveness, reconciliation, and repentance. Regardless, it should be clear to us all by now that we need healing and strength beyond our own power, for we are all weak, sick, and so easily distracted. To recognize that is no shame, but simply the lesson learned by all the great sinners who have come to their senses and begun the journey home.

Before we begin the journey to the cross on Palm Sunday, there is still time to examine our souls with brutal honesty, confess and repent, and take the steps we can to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. He made holy people out of prostitutes and power-mongers and He will do the same with us, if we will only repent with courageous honesty and humility. Yes, there is hope even for you and me through humble repentance that opens us to the mercy of the Lord.