

Father David's sermon on April 10th 2021 - St Mary of Egypt and Mark 10:32-45

I heard a story some time ago about two policemen who were in their car on an observation ramp at the side of the M25. One of them said to the other, "Look at that funny old car! You don't often see vehicles like that these days!"

Just over an hour and half later the first policeman said, "Look! It's that old car again! And there's a little old lady at the wheel! I wonder what she's up to?"



More than an hour later, the same lady passed them a third time, so they went off in pursuit, overtook her and flagged her down.

"Are you alright Madam?" they asked. "Where are you off to?"

"Oh Yes thank you Officer!" said the old lady, "I'm off to visit my daughter in Hertfordshire!"

They told her her mistake and gave her precise instructions about which junction to look out for. She was doing something wrong, and she needed someone to redirect her.

Something similar happened to the saint we remember today on the 5th Sunday of Lent.

Mary of Egypt grew up in Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast of Egypt. We can't be sure of when she lived, but it was either in the later 300s or later 400s. Mary's story is rather X certificate.

She must have gotten into bad company, because by the age of 12 she had discovered what fun sex could be, and she ran away from home so that she could get as much of it as possible. She refused to take money from her customers, and lived by begging and spinning flax.

This was her lifestyle for seventeen years. And then one day she met a group of young men who were setting off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and she decided to sail with them, taking the opportunity of the voyage to seduce the other pilgrims.

When they arrived at the great church of the Resurrection, Mary also wanted to go in, but an unseen force prevented her from entering. After three attempts, she looked up and saw an icon of the Mother of God.

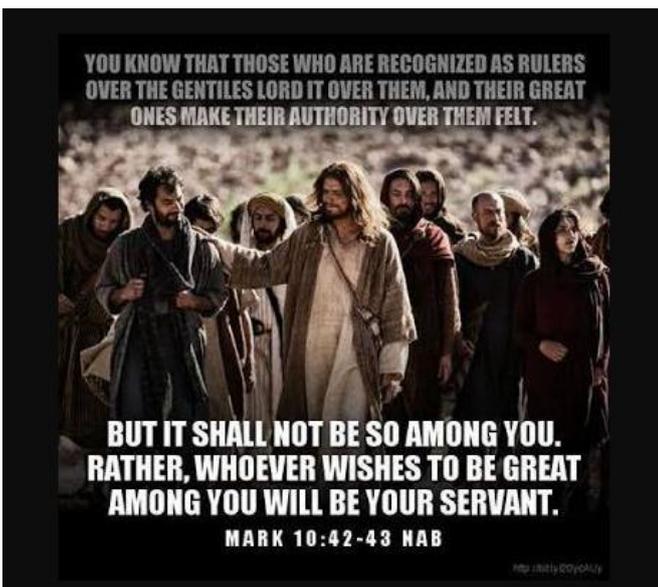
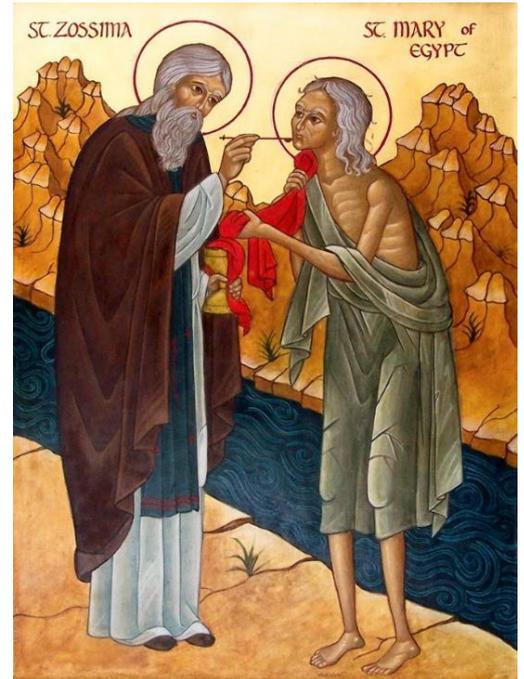
We know very little about Mary's background, but she must have had some Christian education.

Suddenly, outside the church of the Resurrection - the church of the Holy Sepulchre, Mary saw herself and her life in a new light, and decided that she wanted to change and to become a follower of Jesus Christ. She began to weep and prayed that the Mother of God might allow her to enter the church and venerate the True Cross. Mary's repentance was profound, and her conversion was profound.

She promised to renounce her worldly desires and to go wherever the Mother of God might lead her. She went into the desert of Judaea to seek the Lord and to pray. She survived on very little food, and according to the story of her life which was written later by St Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem in the 7th century, for seventeen years she was tormented by “wild beasts - mad desires and passions.” She came through this, and spent altogether 47 years growing in holiness, in prayer and solitude, and then she met the priest Zosima.

Zosima was a monk at a monastery near the river Jordan, and it was the custom there for all the brethren to go out into the desert for the forty days of Lent, spending the time in fasting and prayer.

Zosima met Mary, and she told him her life story and asked him to come back the following year on Holy Thursday, in order to bring her Holy Communion. He did so, and the third year he came to her again in the desert, but he found that she had died, and he buried her.



Our Gospel reading this morning presents us with two brothers who stand in great contrast to Mary. James and John were two of the 12 disciples, the men with whom Jesus lived and shared his most important teachings. Jesus has just told them the most important thing of all: he is going to be put to death. But it is as if James and John have not heard him. They seem only interested in themselves and in their position in Jesus’ new community. “Please may we be your right hand men?” they asked.

Jesus goes on to say, “*Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*” And then he speaks about himself, using the title ‘Son of Man’: he says: “For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus laid down his life on the cross of Calvary and rose from the dead three days later in order that we might be delivered from the sting of death and enter into eternal life. So don’t follow the example of James and John: don’t try and push yourself forward. But do follow the example of Mary of Egypt. St Mary is one of the church’s best examples of repentance. The Gospels open with St John the Baptist preaching repentance.

St Mark tells us that Jesus started his ministry by proclaiming: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” And in the last book of the Bible, in the letters to the Seven churches, to four of them, Jesus again emphasises the necessity of repentance.

Repentance means a sincere turning away, in both the mind and heart, from self to God. It involves a change of mind that leads to action - the radical turning away from a sinful course to God. It involves a judgment on the past and a deliberate redirection for the future. It is not something you do once in your life before becoming a Christian, it is something a Christian needs to do again and again throughout a lifetime.



You may not be a sex addict like Mary in Alexandria. You may not be someone who drives round the M25 three times. But if you are honest, there have been many occasions when you have gone in the wrong direction. Each one of us needs to be aware of this, and to turn round and go in the right direction – the direction God wants us to follow.

And the Church provides ways for us to examine our hearts and lives, it provides ways for us to refocus and to redirect our lives.

One of the sacraments of the Church is *Confession*. Confession helps us to take our sins seriously, to see where we need repentance and to help us make the necessary changes in our lives. If you have not been to confession for some time, may I encourage you to make an appointment with Father Vissarion? Confession is never easy, and I know that it is embarrassing. But it is a medicine provided by the Church. And you will feel so much better afterwards!

“There is no pit so deep that God’s love is not deeper still:” - whether that is a pit of suffering, or a pit of sin.

There’s a way back to God from the dark paths of sin;

There’s a door that is open and you may go in:

At Calvary’s cross is where you begin,

When you come as a sinner to Jesus. Amen.