

The reading from today's Gospel brings together the opposing states of sin and holiness in the form of the woman, a known sinner, who produces an alabaster jar of ointment and anoints the Lord's feet while wetting them with her tears and drying them with her hair. This outstanding act of penitence draws scorn from the religious expert, a Pharisee, who is Christ's host, but commendation from Christ since her act shows her remorse and love for God. The one to whom little is forgiven loves little but this woman shows her faith by her action and her gratitude for God's forgiveness. This is a remarkable public act of penitence on the scale of that shown by King David in Psalm 50 after he has been brought to task by the prophet Nathan for committing adultery with Bathsheeba and murdering her husband Uriah the Hittite by placing him in the front row in battle. This is recited by the priest during the singing of the Cherubic Hymn. *at the point at which we are about to offer the bloodless sacrifice and receive Christ himself in the bread and wine. The secret prayer of the priest about sinfulness is very powerful at this point.*

(Similarly, today we are celebrating) the life of St Mary of Egypt, another of the great sinners and saints of the Church. According to Church Tradition she was a famous harlot who conceived a desire to enter the church of the Holy Sepulchre to see the elevation of the Cross. According to the hymnography in Vespers a mysterious divine force physically prevented her from crossing the threshold despite several attempts because of the pollution of her sins. Her conscience immediately condemned her for her past life and an experience of great repentance took place. In reparation for her sinful life, guided by the Mother of God, she crossed the Jordan and went to live the ascetic life in the desert where earlier John the Baptist had dwelt. The records say that she became a great saint being visited by an elder called Zossima on one occasion. On his return to see her later he was confronted by a lion which is supposed to have buried her.

Now what is striking in both these people is the passion with which they live the sinful life and the ascetic life. Their zeal puts us to shame. Perhaps that's why the Lord spent so much time with tax collectors and fallen women. Even in repentance our pride manifests itself in that our public face and shame are as important as our disgrace before God. In our repentance too how little authenticity there is since if it were genuine the same sin could not be repeated.

In almost every major service of the Church we pray, "that we may pass the remaining time of our lives in peace and repentance, let us ask of the Lord." To wish to live in peace in a worldly sense and to have within us 'the peace that is from above' is easy to comprehend and is most desirable since it brings stability and balance. But to repent for the rest of our lives is not so clear. And yet the Fathers tell us that seeing our own sins is a greater gift than rising from the dead. What we are talking about here in this act is the constant turning away from ourselves and moving towards God. The Church grants us (these) special times to fast and look within. And you will all know a certain sense of disappointment, as well as relief, at Pascha because there has been an inner feeling of some progress in looking at life and ourselves with the eyes of the Kingdom, as God sees, and not as we do from our own selfish perspective. The feast replaces the fast in a timely way lest we think the inner progress is a result of our own actions and not the grace of God. But the continued repentance is necessary because in opening our eyes to our own sins it reveals also the real inner gifts put there by God to be used for the benefit of others. In that sense we are coming to a greater knowledge of self, both good and

bad, and of course with that knowledge comes a peace that we are rich in Christ through his gifts to us, the so-called treasures of the Kingdom.

In that process too there will be times when we seem to return to the same place again and again and fall at the same hurdle. The inner pain and suffering when stripped of natural pride will bear much fruit in the realms of discovering true humility and enable us to have a correct vision of ourselves. The danger here is that dejection and despair can creep in. No! The root of the sin is being gradually weakened. Nothing remains the same in the spiritual as well as the physical life. St Peter goes on from denying Christ three times to leading His Church and offering his life as a martyr at Rome. *But there is also a danger in not confessing our habitual sins.*

St Mary of Egypt goes to the desert not just to lament her own sins. That is just the beginning of the process. She goes with a vision inspired by God of what the ^{penitent} ascetic life can bring. This is the other side of repentance. Nobody can abandon anything unless he can see the greater good which will come from doing so. This is as true of the monastic who renounces possessions, marriage and his own will as it is for us who struggle to make progress in our own limited ways. It is a vision granted by God.

As we journey towards Pascha and today contemplate the life of this great saint who from sin is brought to the angelic life of the desert, let us ask God that we too may have a taste of this experience of repentance of the woman with the jar of ointment that turns her from her sinful life and fills her with love for Christ. Amen.