

5th SUNDAY OF LENT · ST MARY OF EGYPT

Today's Gospel and the Saint whose memory we celebrate today and whose prayers we especially ask for, take us into the company of conspicuous and notable sinners, who also had a public reputation as such. And yet It is salutary to remind ourselves that a common prostitute is revered today by her position in Lent as one of the great ascetic saints of the Orthodox world, who received the gift of repentance in an outstanding way. And perhaps even more strangely she was a saint who, as far as we know, never set foot in a church. We certainly do know that she was barred from a church or rather was kept out of entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem by a divine force, an event which changed her life dramatically. Most of us here do not keep the company of prostitutes in our everyday life but it is interesting to note how frequently Jesus found himself in the company of this kind of person and in a sense how comfortable he found himself with them, perhaps because he was able to speak without any kind of pretence with them and therefore, as it were to do meaningful spiritual business with them. One is reminded of the woman at Jacob's well and the powerful, life-changing conversation which goes on about living water. There is something about the intensity of the conditions of the life of a prostitute that makes them able to read the hearts and motives of men and women very accurately and clearly. Today we hear of the woman who is a sinner but whose consciousness of her own sin provokes this remarkable act of gratitude in the anointing and washing of the Lord's feet, an act, the righteousness of which so exceeds that of the Pharisees, to use Christ's words from elsewhere, that it calls forth the comment of Christ about the inseparable connection between the experience of forgiveness and that of love for God.

In the church the act of forgiving or absolution is so quick, almost so automatic in the sacrament of confession as to provoke comment. We simply kneel and through the priest's stole laid on our head we receive forgiveness from God for whatever hideous or minor sin we might have committed and confessed. In a similar way we pray for forgiveness on the assumption that we too have forgiven others their sins against us. This forgiving and being forgiven is assumed to be something we do as a matter of course, naturally, as natural as sinning itself, but it also presupposes great prolonged inner spiritual struggles and wrestling, like Jacob with the angel, before we can emerge at dawn with God's blessing and a new name which signifies what we have become.

It is interesting from this point of view how confession is viewed and handled by people who come from an Orthodox tradition and culture and those who are, as it were like many of us, new to the tradition. In the former case sinning, asking forgiveness and being forgiven is treated in a much more practical and routine way but with no less seriousness. In fact, the penitent has a kind of rhythm in which he operates, seeking out a priest, confessing and receiving absolution before communion in a much more relaxed way. He or she feels at ease with the priest because they know that he has probably committed the same sins and

can therefore feel his solidarity, his prayers, and because they know his concern for their salvation they feel free to talk in an unrestrained way about their sins and their life in general, rather than enumerating a list of sins, which are often the symptoms not the root of the problem. There is little or much less of the feeling "I could never tell him that about myself. He might use it against me. And here there is a failure to understand that the priest is bound by an oath not to divulge anything which is said to him in a confession. My confession can only be with x who alone understands me and is my spiritual father." Very often in this case the priest senses that the real problem has not been touched upon and the person departs unhealed to quote from the prayer before confession. It is useful to recall the life of St Silouan of Athos, who consulted many of the holy men of Athos on particular spiritual matters but had no regular confessor throughout his life. He simply went to the first priest he could find, made his confession and prayed that God would speak to him meaningfully through the first words the priest uttered. This gift of confession which he so obviously had is so pure, simple and uncomplicated, derived from the assurance of God's love and patience with us and the confidence that God does speak to us.

The story of the woman with the alabaster flask of ointment and the life of St Mary of Egypt, who was physically prevented by some unseen force from entering the church in Jerusalem and who as a consequence spent her life beyond the Jordan in the desert repenting of the sins of her life these accounts remind us forcibly of the words of Christ. "Those who are forgiven much love much." In the material for Matins for today Mary is hymned for her gift of repentance. In Lent we too are told to fast and limit in whatever way we can the needs of our bodies. This does not come easily given the modern life styles which we have and the demands on our time made by our families. But there are simple things we should and could be doing. The prayer of St Ephraim is a guide to the kind of repentance and new life that we seek. Its recitation in the evening and morning reminds us of the need to look at and examine ourselves and not others, to focus on our own sins. The prostrations can help us likewise to discipline our bodies. But most importantly the readings from scripture, especially from the prophet Isaiah, help us to see ourselves as the Israel that has deserted the God whose love for us is without limit.

How closely the experience of St Silouan and Fr Sophrony is linked to that of St Mary. In the former cases the realisation of their own sins and that of the world brought them to frequent tears which bound them to the world and their fellow man and brought them the gift of deep prayer born of compassion. In the case of St Mary of Egypt, the recognition of her failings brings her to such a state of humility that she retires to the desert to pray for herself and the world and we are told is brought to an angelic state. It is important for us to look very closely at ourselves during this God-given time when the prayers of the Church and the saints are especially active on our behalf. We too need to pray for the same gift of repentance from God which can give our hearts the newness of life that follows from it and the deep inner joy which follows repentance and the reconnecting of our lives with God. May He grant us all and our families throughout the

remaining time of the Fast something of the power of being forgiven that can draw us to God with greater love for Him. Amen.

14th April 2019, Oxford

