

*“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night...When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise...” [Ps 41:2-4]*

Today, the fifth Sunday of the Great Fast, we commemorate the ascetic, Mary of Egypt. She has her own feast day, of course, on the first of April, but her story and her ascetic victory are also brought to mind on this day; they fit well with our own endeavours in the season of Great Lent, albeit her triumph in Christ over sin and the flesh are in a league of their own. Meanwhile, we, for our part, merely struggle just to struggle at all!

I shall not rehearse her story. If you do not know it you can find a concise version, readily available on the Internet. Suffice it to say, that after a dissolute early life, Mary received absolution and the Holy Gifts, and then departed for the desert. Here, through a life, fully withdrawn from the world, yet fully engaged in the ascetic struggle of the way of the cross, she united her soul to Christ. *‘Have you united yourself to Christ?’* is one of the questions asked of candidates for Baptism (or their sponsors, in the case of little children). It is a union into which we all entered at the beginning of our discipleship. And truly, there can be few things more holy in this world than an innocent and newly baptised infant, united to Christ. Our struggle, therefore, is to maintain that communion until the end.

There is, I think, something about Mary’s life in the desert that is reflected partly in our current situation. Not that we can compare the current events in which we are caught up with the life of this spiritual heroine, but Mary’s situation in the desert has much to teach us and she calls us to reassess our own spiritual experience. At the very least, she is the epitome of what it means to repent and be changed.

We would, I think, consider Mary's spiritual life a strange one, in that, having gone into the desert, far from any church congregation, she only received communion once more, at the very end of her life, after Zosimas had discovered her. In the earliest days of the Church Christians tended to receive Holy Communion at least weekly, on the Lord's Day. In times of persecution the faithful were entrusted with the Holy Gifts to take home, so that they could communicate themselves in uncertain times. This practice fell away when large numbers of people became (often only nominally) Christian, following the reign of St Constantine the Great as emperor. Quite rightly, the Church has always guarded the holy mysteries from being profaned and could no longer entrust the Holy Gifts outside the control and protection of those under holy orders.

So, to some small degree, we are all forced to join with St Mary of Egypt in a fast from communion itself. We observe, of course, the fast before communion, knowing that when we come to receive the holy mysteries, we experience the greatest spiritual joy of our week. It disturbs the pattern of our religious duties; it seems to hollow out of spiritual endeavour. But in as much as this is forced upon us during the current pandemic, we most certainly do not just give up: we adapt. Like Mary, we have to enter and dwell in the desert, if only a spiritual one, and only for a time.

I am aware that it is possible to make a virtue out of necessity, as they say but, on the other hand, we can exploit this time for our soul's good nonetheless. This deprivation of communion must become part of our Lenten asceticism. We can let this little taste of the eremitic life teach us to value the Holy Gifts even more; we can prepare even more fully, repent more deeply, strive to change more zealously.

The Divine Liturgy is still served each Sunday, even if with only a 'skeleton crew' and, be assured, you are all prayed for in the Body of Christ; those absent for a reasonable cause; the bloodless sacrifice offered *'in behalf of all and for all.'* It is indeed strange, to say the least, serving the Liturgy with so few present. We can all sympathise with the psalmist remembering the exultant throng filling the temple, whilst he thirsts for God in exile (Ps.41:2-4). In that case it is even

more important that we intensify the practice of the three Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

We may be isolated, one from another, but we are still His body, the Church, united in the Spirit when we pray. So, if you have not yet done so, establish a pattern of prayer for yourself that you can fulfil. And read the scriptures, following at home, as far as possible, the lectionary and calendar of the Church. This is the very basic way in which we can assimilate into our own lives the Church's common life.

Let us be careful how we use these days of isolation. Our Lenten fasting is not just from various types of food, but we should also take care, especially, if currently, we are faced with days of inactivity, that we do not fill up our time merely with entertainments. Remember, that those of you now faced with home-schooling your own children have an opportunity to add real Orthodox Christian teaching and formation to their education.

And thirdly, within the constraints of your own budgets, given that many will not earn at present what they had previously been used to, do not neglect to give proportionately, both to the upkeep of our on church building which is still to be maintained for our use, and in offerings in charity, for the love God.

Finally, I urge you to be sober and watchful over your own souls. Do not be too concerned that you cannot confess in church regularly, as you might have done once. The essence of confession is repentance and a zealous determination to change. The priest indeed brings us the grace and blessing of God's absolution, the fulness of reconciliation with the Church, spiritual counsel and the renewal of our baptismal purity. Mary of Egypt had no one to hear her confession through those long years in the desert, yet her humility and repentance led Zosimas to see her walk upon the waters of the Jordan. More especially, let us beware of the activity of the Evil One at this time. His only desire is to see you fall away. This is a time of testing for Christ's holy ones. Like the psalmist, let us thirst for the living God.