

Sermon on The Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt

For Those Whom It Has Been Prepared (Mark 10:32-45 & Luke:7:36-50)

‘The door to the kingdom of heaven is humility,’ so says St. John Chrysostom. One of the few arguments you’ll hear in the Orthodox Church today is the place of ‘humiliation.’ Some in the Church today, accepting the teaching of modern mental health say there is no place for humiliation in the process of gaining humility. Others say there is no way to gain humility *without* experiencing humiliation.

I believe the Fathers, and especially the Mothers of the Church, would say that they are both right. That humiliation, like faith or even love, in and of itself is of little value. However ‘in Christ’ it is beyond important - it is life. That is, to simply experience humiliation, to feel our ego’s wounded, has no value in helping us overcome our egos, which we must do to gain humility, unless we willingly accept the humiliation for that purpose.

The *unwilling* experience of humiliation will wound and embitter us. The *willing* acceptance of humiliation apart from Christ will lead to pride and delusion. But the willing - past or present - acceptance of humiliation *in Christ* will make us conquerors. More than conquerors - we will be virtually unassailable...Nothing can harm us and we have no need to do anything to protect ourselves. No need to achieve or attain anything, no need to control others and our world because we have no fear. The ‘us,’ the ‘me’ the fear has driven us to protect is replaced with the peace that is beyond understanding.

Please understand I’m not saying having humility doesn’t mean we no longer have boundaries - we still have boundaries - Jesus had boundaries. But the boundaries that we have in humility (in Christ) - in this peace - are **not** to protect us, **they are to protect others from themselves.**

Abba Dorotheos of Gaza teaches, using the analogy of a wall, that humility is the mortar that holds the stones of the virtues in place. St. John of the Ladder whom we commemorated last week, teaches that the scripture that says “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor.4:7) interprets the earthen vessels as our mortal bodies, and says the inscription on this treasure of unspeakable and eternal value is ‘humility.’

This is the reason repentance is the path to the kingdom of heaven, because the path of repentance leads to the door of humility: the door of salvation. Repentance is the difference between victimhood and humility. Repentance is the difference between religious pride and humility - between delusion and humility. It is the ‘how’ of how to experience humiliation (or anything else) in Christ. And it is the only way to experience humiliation and not be harmed by it - in fact to actually be healed by it. To experience humiliation as a life-giving cross and not an attack on our person.

In Mark’s Gospel today the Apostles simply would not/could not hear what Jesus was telling them. They had seen this man, the Messiah, conquer all the forces of hell, conquer the wind and the rain and the seas by calming storms and walking on water, and they had

seen him even conquer death by raising Jarius's daughter and the widow of Nain's son. How could he not, despite this cross he keeps talking about - not also conquer the Romans?!

St. Mark clearly conveys the sad reality that at this point in their lives, the Apostles are primarily concerned with the Apostles. They (James and John) respond to Jesus restating his upcoming death by asking for places of dignity in heaven. Which makes the other ten angry because they're jealous of them! Where is the repentance? Where is the humility? The great messianic chapter of Isaiah 53 teaches: '...by His stripes we are healed.' Healed of what? Healed of the pride of self-love...which is death. The conqueror conquers through stripes, through suffering and humiliation, and shows us the way to conquer through humiliation, but again, not just humiliation, *His* humiliation - *His* cross.

This is the baptism he is talking about when he says to John and James they will have to be baptized with His baptism. But St. John Chrysostom tells us it is very, very important to understand what Jesus means when he says to them "to sit on the right and the left is not mine to give." How can that be if He is God? Because that is for those who have earned it! To those who have carried their cross, who have chosen the 'good thing.' Who have found the treasure of humility buried in these earthen jars.

This is for the Son who repents and not the one who is obedient. It is for the woman who washes his feet in the tears of repentance, not for the hospitality of the Pharisee. It is for the one who chooses to be a servant instead of a master. It is for the one like the priest and monk Zosimas who we read about just a few days ago, who sees his monastic life of asceticism and religious purity and perfection as nothing in the face of the deified humility of Mary of Egypt - who falls at her feet begging her to bless him.

This is why we always remember and pray for the Fathers *and* the Mothers of the Church. Our fathers, as our fathers, teach us, protect us and guide us - as we have seen these last two weeks with the commemoration of St. Gregory Palamas and St. John Climacus. They show us what it is we must strive towards and how to do it. We can't get there without them.

But this week, the week before we focus our eyes only on Jesus and his passion, we are to focus on our Mothers. To focus on the life of St. Mary is to also focus on the Theotokos - who guided her every step of the way. The Fathers teach us and protect us, but we must be born of the Mothers.

The Theotokos and Mary of Egypt give us the same humility even though they come to it from the two farthest extremes: the Theotokos' humility comes to us from the greatest purity and holiness among men; while St. Mary's humility comes to us from the greatest struggle against un-holiness and depravity we possess...truly, we all will be somewhere between the two of them, and we all must be born of them - of their humility.

Every man that is born in the Church has the opportunity to become a Patriarch, Metropolitan, bishop or priest. No woman born in the Church or who comes to the Church

has that opportunity. As a father of daughters I have struggled with this reality...This seeming inequity. What then can they become? What do they have? The holy Mothers of the Church throughout the ages answer this question with one voice: "we have humility."

In the Mother's humility there are no distinctions among us: Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female - we are all one. Without the humility of the Mother's there is nothing *but* distinction, nothing *but* our differences, we are *only* Jew or gentile, slave or free, male or female...

Most of us who are Orthodox will to a greater or lesser extent embrace the teachings of the Fathers, but we must all be born of the mother's humility. If we lose the humility of the mothers, which seems to the world like disenfranchisement and humiliation, NONE of the dogmas or teaching of the Fathers can help us. If we lose the Mother's precious humility - we are lost.