

SELF INDULGENCE

On this 5th Sunday of Great Lent, our Saviour is preparing His disciples for the imminent events relating to His Passion and Resurrection (Mark 10: 32-45):

And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid. And he took again the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen unto him, Saying, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again. And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared. And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John. But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Our Saviour knows that His final days before His Passion have come. He knows that His disciples will be tried and tested, so He is providing detailed, prophetic expectations, so as to prepare them and strengthen them during these imminent trials. Christ has shared details of His last days before to His disciples, and is now reinforcing and encouraging them further. These are important and powerful words. The disciples have left their homes, their families, their professions, and have closely followed their Master for three years, hearing the Word, witnessing great miracles, and beholding the Light of man's salvation.

Despite such intense preparation and instruction over a long span of time, and the weight of Christ's current words regarding His imminent suffering and death, two disciples seem to be on a different plane of orientation. They are relatively oblivious to the magnitude and significance of our Saviour's ominous

and foretelling words, and care more so for their own personal fate, blinded by ambition and seeking glory for themselves! This is indeed quite striking how two of Christ's intimate disciples, seasoned and prepared through prolonged and careful training and witness, on the eve of the arrest and torture of their Master, only think about their personal gratification of self-indulgence and vainglory. This is a testimony of the power of human ambition and self-gratification, (offshoots of the malignant contagion of pride), in blinding and enslaving human nature. Holy Scripture is saturated with examples, warnings and admonishments relating to the trappings of vainglory and self-indulgence. The evil one, the grand deceiver, knew that this would be an effective enticement, luring Eve towards disobedience with the promise: "then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods" (Genesis 3:5). St. John Climacus warns about the potential for acquired virtue to be lost through self-indulgence and vainglory:

The ant waits for the gathering of the wheat, and vainglory for the gathering of the riches of virtue; for the one loves to steal and the other to squander.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent (Step 22)

On this 5th Sunday of Great Lent, we are also provided encouragement through the extraordinary story of St. Mary of Egypt. St. Mary, from the time she was twelve, sank into a different pit of self-indulgence, that of lasciviousness and self-gratifying physical passions. So great was her appetite that, unlike harlots, she sought no remuneration for her "services", seeking only to satisfy an insatiable desire for physical pleasure. After 17 years of sustained debauchery, through which not only her soul was enslaved but countless souls were dragged down, our patient Lord, through His boundless mercy, saw an opportunity to prick her conscience and arouse her soul. St. Mary, driven by curiosity, was interested in stepping into the church where pilgrims gathered for the celebration of the life-giving Cross. A force kept her from entering. It was likely the first time in her life that what she wanted was not reachable for her, (given the ease by which she would previously seduce anyone to satisfy her desires). This left her dumbfounded and stunned... jolting her soul. Our Saviour knew that, like the Prodigal Son, she needed to experience deprivation in order for her spiritual eyes to be opened:

Having repeated my attempt three or four times, at last I felt exhausted and had no more strength to push and to be pushed, so I went aside and stood in a corner of the porch. And only then with great difficulty it began to dawn on me, and I began to understand the reason why I was prevented from being admitted to see the life-giving Cross. The word of salvation gently touched the eyes of my heart and revealed to me that it was my unclean life which barred the entrance to me. I began to weep and lament and beat my breast, and to sigh from the depths of my heart.

St. Mary of Egypt

What St. Mary came to realize was that not only was she barred from entering the church, but her unrepentant sins were barring her soul from salvation and eternal life. This was the moment when she, like the Prodigal Son, “came to herself” (Luke 15:17), and, with the help of the Mother of God, embarked on the path of repentance.

...Now lead me by the hand along the path of repentance!

St. Mary of Egypt (addressing the Mother of God)

After she was subsequently immersed into her soul-cleansing path of repentance, her eyes were able to readily see the involvement of the evil one in his enticements and in her previous life, (as well as aggressive efforts to tempt her back into her old ways):

May God defend us against the evil one and from his designs, for fierce is his struggle against us.

St. Mary of Egypt (addressing St. Zosimas)

A person’s obstinacy, self-indulgence and entrenched enslavement to a sin-driven life is never greater than the patience and boundless love of our merciful Lord, Who desires not the death of a sinner, but he returns (repents) and lives (Ezekial 18:23). Our Lord was not repulsed by the vainglorious ambition of His disciples James and John, seeing readily that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). After their repentance, He later blessed them with the descent of the Holy Spirit, and awarded them eternal life sealed by their martyrdom. Our Lord never gave up on the profligate Mary, even after 17 years of persistent debauchery, waiting for the opportune moment when her heart can be stirred towards the reverse course of repentance.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as the ever corrupt world around us entices us to embrace self-indulgence as a personal right and means of self-empowerment, let us see clearly the trap that is being laid for us, and draw encouragement from our all-merciful Lord, who awaits our repentance and whose “mercy pursues us all the days of our lives!” (Psalm 22) Let us pursue acts of holy humility, (especially during this holy season of Great Lent), which are opposite to acts of self-indulgence, conditioning our souls to worthily receive our Resurrected Saviour!

In the Name of the Father , and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! Amen!

