

Dearly beloved in Christ,

We have arrived at the fifth and final Sunday of Great Lent. Tomorrow we enter the final week of the Fast called “Palm Week” because it will lead us to Bethany on Saturday when our Lord Jesus will raise his friend Lazarus and then up to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The Scripture readings on this Sunday again, as last Sunday, draw our hearts and minds to the great work of salvation which our Lord is about to take upon Himself. And today we commemorate a great saint who finally in her life came to know the salvation Jesus won through the Cross.

In the first reading today Saint Paul recounts that the high priest took with him the blood of goats and bulls as an offering for his own sins and the sins of the people. This sacrifice was imperfect because the blood of animals could not and cannot set aright humanity before God. Humanity was responsible for the first sin. But humanity could not redeem itself. It would require the work of God, work fulfilled in the God-man, our Lord Jesus Christ. In a few short days, our Lord, our Great High Priest – perfect God and perfect man, will go up to Jerusalem to offer up His own life, His own blood on the Cross so that we may be saved. And by this sacrifice we are to purify our consciences “from dead works to serve the living God.” Our Lord Jesus came to ransom us from the dead works of sin and from death so that we could be true servants of our heavenly Father.

In the reading from the gospel of Saint Mark, Jesus more fully reveals to us where He is going and what He will allow to happen to Him. “As they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem....Jesus...began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.’” He is going to ascend to Jerusalem to offer Himself as a ransom for many. This is why He was conceived in the womb of Mary, this is why He was born, this is what He will do to save us. As He says at the end of the gospel, He, the Son of God, came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. By His life, death and resurrection He is revealed as the perfect servant of God. And His example calls us to serve one another, to serve God, not ourselves.

We have today Saint Mary of Egypt, whom we commemorate every fifth Sunday of Lent, as one who finally heard the Lord’s call to serve not the works of darkness but the living God. Saint Mary of Egypt lived a profligate life as a young woman, being not a handmaid of the Lord but a servant to her own lusts of the flesh. On one occasion, as she traveled up to Jerusalem to see the Cross of the Lord, she found herself held back by an unseen hand, unable to enter the church. And looking at the icon of the Mother of God in the courtyard, she recognized that it was her sin which had removed her from God’s presence. She prayed fervently and with tears promising to amend her life, to serve the Lord in spirit and in truth. And, when she went to enter the church again, she was able to go forward and venerate the Cross of the Lord. Then she went out into the desert for more than forty years living a life of repentance, serving God by taking up the cross to fight against her temptations. There, in the desolation of the desert she did spiritual battle and died in sanctity. She understood her need for repentance, to cease being a slave to herself and her passions and instead to become a servant of the Lord Jesus. Going to the Cross of the Lord made her realize that she must struggle against the works of darkness which called to her. And by the victory won by our Lord Jesus on Calvary and her working with His grace, her conscience was purified from dead works to serve the living God.

This is our theme for Lent and for all of our lives. Turning from our sins in order to accept the gift of salvation we receive through our Great High Priest, our Lord Jesus Christ. Turning from service to sin and becoming servants of God. Our lenten journey now turns to follow our Lord Jesus in reliving the day to day events which will take Him from Bethany to Jerusalem, to the Cross and to the Tomb. Let us turn our lives over to Him, continuing in our path of to become His true servants, so that we can know the joy which Saint Mary of Egypt knew, being able to draw near and venerate the Lord's throne, His Cross, on which He poured forth His life so that we may be raised up with Him on the third day.