My Beloved Ones,

This Sunday, St. Paul writes that “…when Christ came as a high priest… he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood… For if the blood of goats and bulls… sanctifies… how much more will the blood of Christ… purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!” (Hebrews 9:11-14) Indeed, it is fitting that the Church has chosen this Epistle because St. Mary of Egypt shows us the importance of purifying our hearts.

On the Feast of the Holy Cross, Mary went to Jerusalem to find men who could support her sinful lifestyle. She wished to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but found that an invisible force would not allow her inside. After tearfully repenting, she was permitted to enter, and she heard a voice say, “If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest.” She went to the Monastery of St. John the Baptist, where she confessed her sins and received the Holy Eucharist. The next morning, she left to live in the wilderness, taking only three loaves of bread. After these were eaten, she allowed herself only what she could find, for 47 years.

In this Sunday’s Gospel, our Lord prepares the Twelve for what we will all soon undergo: “…the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again” (Mark 10:33-34). After this, James and John ask Him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37). Even with this prophecy, the Disciples still do not understand. “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” James and John say that they are, but our Lord shows them what they lack: “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared” (Mark 10:38; 40). The other Ten are upset, but they still do not see that to be a follower of Christ is not to be rewarded, but to be humbled.

“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”. (Mark 10:42-45) Concerning St. Mary of Egypt, we can see someone who lived a life of sin, until she understood her unworthiness, and left the world to purify herself. She knew that to be a follower of Christ means we must deny ourselves.

In only two weeks we will offer our lamentations as we venerate the tomb of our Lord. As we continue to prepare ourselves for the events of Holy Week, we must prayerfully consider what it means to be a true follower of Christ. Are we concerned mostly with our desires and pleasures, or can we imagine what it means to be great by serving others, before ourselves?

+ALEXIOS
Metropolitan of Atlanta