

The Prodigal Son

On this second Sunday of the preparatory Triodion period before Great Lent, we are presented with a parable that brings us great hope, that of the Prodigal Son, as presented in the Gospel according to St. Luke: 11-32.

And he said, a certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

When we behold the arrogant and bold position of the younger son, we are naturally taken back. It is one thing to desire to extricate himself from an environment that he finds too restrictive, (as we see in so many adolescents), seeking out personal “freedom” where he is accountable to only himself, but his self-centeredness is further polluted by his exorbitant demand of His father, to receive what he believes to be rightfully his. The origin of this bold action is unadulterated, self-justified **pride**, a genetically passed contagion that infects each and every one of us. God, through His love and mercy, provides us with the means to tame this potentially terminal passion, through the holy medicine of **obedience**. St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco writes:

Are not many inspired by similar impulses today, and, while they may not leave their parents’ home, do they not depart from the home of their Heavenly Father, that is, from obedience to the holy Church?

God provides us with the Holy Church, the Body to which the head is Christ our Saviour, as the sole means and vehicle for our salvation. But this requires our effort, faith, sacrifice, adherence and obedience. The Church is described to be an Arc, one that guides us through the tumultuous seas of life, bringing us to the eternal safe haven of God’s kingdom. As we see from the example of St. Peter, once he steps out of the protective Arc (of the Church) onto the stormy seas, and takes his gaze away from Christ, he sinks into potential oblivion, (Matthew 14: 28-32).

In today’s instructive parable, the young son eagerly leaves his father’s home, unable to see the spiritual value of holy obedience, believing that... he “knows better”. Does this not remind us of the tragic decision of Adam, rejecting and fleeing from holy obedience to God’s one commandment, believing that he “knows better”? And where did this bring him? and all of his descendents? bringing suffering, strife, and death! As we live our daily lives, making decisions, judgments and taking initiatives, do we take into sufficient account God’s will? the teachings and commandments of His Church? or, do we “know better”?

Although we may be taken back by the harsh demands of the young son prior to his departure, the Holy Fathers teach that we ourselves indeed make similar, soul-destroying demands, utilizing God-given talents and gifts for our own satisfaction and not in obedience to God’s will, (Who desires our eternal salvation). Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov writes:

The younger son’s inheritance is God’s gifts, with which every person is endowed, especially Christians. The most supreme gifts of God are the mind and heart, and especially the grace of the Holy Spirit given to every Christian. The son’s demand that

the father give him his inheritance to use according his own will is man's attempt to cast off his submission to God, and follow his own thoughts and desires. The father ceding the inheritance is a portrayal of the self-governance with which God honored man for the use of His gifts. The far country is a sinful life, distancing and alienating us from God. The squandering of the inheritance is the exhaustion of the powers of our mind, heart and body; in particular the outrage against the Holy Spirit and its expulsion from ourselves through our sinful deeds. The younger son's poverty is the soul's emptiness, which comes about from a sinful life.

As we continually "abuse" God's gifts through our self-driven, "I know better" sinfulness, we are distanced from God. And, having jumped from [obedience to] the protective Arc of the Church, we are swept away by the tumultuous waves of the passions, landing in the dark reaches of the world that is controlled by the hater of mankind (and its "citizens", the demons), becoming powerless slaves of his bidding.

The young son, after experiencing great hardship and suffering (which was a blessing!), finally "comes to himself", responding to the voice of his conscience, and... repents. His repentance is augmented and sealed by his **humility**, as expressed by his fervent desire to be accepted back as a servant, and not as a son. As we see in Holy Scripture and in the lives of the saints, holy virtues that are blended with humility are cemented and validated. He then embarks on the difficult journey home, which is, in effect, an "action" of repentance. His all-loving and patient father, who represents God the Father, after receiving his humility-laced **confession**, receives him back with jubilation and joy, which is shared by all the bodiless powers in Heaven!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, each and every one of us, through our daily sins, follows the initial, soul-threatening path of the Prodigal Son, distancing ourselves from God. The Church, in her mercy and love, provides the way back to eternal safety and comfort... through the soul-saving mix of earnest **repentance**, heartfelt **humility**, and uninhibited **confession**. Through this prescribed means, we are presented the lighted path out of the dark abyss of the demon-dominated "far country".

As we now prepare ourselves for the soul-strengthening journey of Great Lent, one in which the soul is infused with the message of repentance and self-denial, may we be invigorated by this wonderful message of hope, as shown by the limitless mercy, patience and love of our eternal Father, Who waits to embrace us and welcome us into His eternal kingdom!

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

