



New Perspective: the Sunday of the Prodigal Son

The Reading is from Luke 15:11-32

"Make haste to open Thy fatherly arms

Unto me who have wasted my life like the prodigal.

Despise not a heart now grown poor

O Savior Who hast before Thine eyes

The boundless riches of Thy mercies.

For unto Thee, O Lord, in compunction do I cry:

O Father, I have sinned against heaven

and before Thee..."

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

In traditional old world Russian parishes in this country, and of course in Russia as well, when the faithful hear sung this particular tropar, this hymn, you will hear an audible sigh or slight groan go up from the more devout in the congregation, as they begin to cross themselves and makes prostrations, for they all know that this Sunday, and this Gospel of the Prodigal Son, and this hymn, is the beginning, it is the overture, so to speak, to the holy season of Great Lent, which begins in just a few weeks time.

Now, we all know this parable very well—the father and his two sons, one of whom takes his inheritance and squanders it on loose living. Then, finding himself impoverished and starving, he returns to his father—who is of course an image of God the Father—and the father embraces him and forgives him and unconditionally welcomes him home, no questions asked.

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Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



We tend to think of this brother as the “prodigal”, rather than his older brother, who had stayed home and complained bitterly about his father receiving the young brother back so warmly and with a welcoming feast as well. He refuses to welcome back his younger brother.

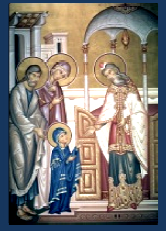
BUT I ASK YOU THIS MORNING, WHICH ONE OF THESE BROTHERS IS THE REAL PRODIGAL SON? PLEASE THINK ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT...

The Holy Fathers of the Church tell us unequivocally that it is *both* brothers. How can this be? How can the older brother, who stayed at home with his father, be considered a “prodigal”? Simply because he expected a reward, he expected something in return for obeying his father and staying at home with him. He had done everything for the all the wrong reasons. Instead of being motivated by love for his father, he was motivated by what he could get from, or out of, his father. He was also unforgiving and self-centered. Therefore he was spiritually dead in his works, in his deeds, as was the younger brother when he was off cavorting with his father’s money.

Now this Sunday, and this Gospel account, are particularly important to Orthodox monks and nuns, for unlike some monastics in the Western or Roman Catholic Church, we do not see ourselves as “brides” or spouses of Christ, but rather we see ourselves as truly and fully the Prodigal Son. For us, the one and only motive for entering monastic life is to repent of our sins, to return wholeheartedly to the Father, and to continue to live a life of daily deep and profound repentance. If we have *any other motive*—whether it is to have a career and advancement in the Church, or a safe retirement home, or to become a priest, or to be considered a wise and holy elder, or to have many spiritual children—then it would be better if we had never entered the monastery at all. In fact, our we are living in sin, like the elder brother in the parable.

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Our motives are impure, to say the least. We are there to repent, and to offer a quiet example to the lay faithful of what spiritual life is supposed to consist of, *and nothing else*.

But the Prodigal Son is not just for monks and nuns. This parable is for everyone, and that's why the Church assigns a whole Sunday to this parable and its theme of repentance.

In the fourth century St. Cyril of Alexandria, in his beautiful homily on this Gospel, wrote the following:

"I hear one of the holy prophets [in the Old Testament] trying to win unto repentance those who are far from God, and saying, "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God: for you have become weak in your iniquity...return to the Lord our God!...And yet again by the voice of Ezekiel, 'Return you altogether from your wickednesses, O house of Israel. Cast away from you all your iniquities which you have committed, that they be not to you for a punishment of iniquity...'And the same truth Christ here also teaches us, by this most beautifully composed parable."

So from this we see that what the Lord was teaching here was nothing new. Through the holy prophets of the Old Testament God had already been long calling out to the people of Israel to come back to Him. And we, brothers and sisters, hear that same cry today... And if we don't hear it, if we are not hearing it as I speak to you now, then we are spiritually in a coma, spiritually deaf, and our condition is very grave, very dangerous, and very grievous. To be frank: we are in danger of losing our salvation.

How many Orthodox Christians attend Church divine services out of duty, perhaps pray a bit at home (but with empty words) and are generous with the parish church and worthy charities, but arrive very late for

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services and then at home or at the workplace they gossip and slander others, even friends and relatives, and show no love or forgiveness. Yet, like the older son in the parable, they still expect to be saved for their empty works. This is arrogance, pure and simple, for this morning's Gospel assures us that they will *not* be saved!

Of course we are all prodigals in a way, but this morning the Church asks us to think about this with more perception than usual and ask: **Which of the two brothers are we most like?**

Brothers and sisters, what will we answer?

Do we truly see our own faults, flaws and sins, or do we mostly just see the sins of others? Are we trying to live repentant lives each day, or perhaps only during Lent, if even then? Are we showing Christian love and forgiveness and compassion to others, or are we withholding this most Christ-like of virtues?

I say to you this morning: it is better for us to be like the younger son in the parable, realizing that we have been living in a "strange land", a "foreign land", as the Gospel narrative puts it, and it is time now for us to go home and live with the Holy Trinity in the Kingdom of love. It is better to be like him rather than the self-righteous older brother, who sees not his own sinfulness, and repents not.

Again, ask yourself: Am I a prodigal son? A hypocrite? A jealous and resentful son? A rebellious son? Am I a sinner who is running into God's open arms asking for mercy? Have I found my way back to the arms of the Father yet, or am I still holding out? Am I wandering in a spiritual desert, or do I see the oasis on the horizon.

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Brothers and sisters, before we die there is still time to repent and make amends. Let us therefore not waste a single day or hour or minute, but hasten to do the will of God.

This is how we, as Orthodox Christians, begin to prepare for the holy season of Lent.

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