

Sunday of the Prodigal Son



“A Man Had Two Sons”

EVERY YEAR ON THIS SECOND SUNDAY of the Triodion we hear the Lord’s story which we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact there are three important characters in this parable, recorded in *Luke 15*: the Prodigal, the loving Father and the older brother. Some commentators feel that the older brother is the most important figure in the story because of the occasion on which the Lord told this parable. To find this context we must look at the first verses of the chapter which precede it, which are not read this Sunday:

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ So He told them this parable...” (Lk 15:1-3).

The Lord then tells not one but three parables about the joy over a repentant sinner: the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the story of the Prodigal. The Lord’s aim in each of them is to confront the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes who saw themselves as properly observant Jews in contrast to those who collaborated with the Roman occupiers (the tax collectors) or those who ignored the precepts of the Law (the sinners). Thus each of the characters in the parable represents one of figures in the above three verses. We have the Rebel son, who represents the sinners, the Conformist son, who embodies the respect for the Law and tradition which characterizes the scribes and Pharisees, and the welcoming Father who is Christ Himself.

The Rebel is truly a prodigal, disrespecting his father by demanding what would come to him at his father’s death – in effect, saying “I wish you were dead.” As we know, he goes off and eventually loses everything. Finally he decides to return to his father, who receives him with love.

The Second Brother

The focus of the tale now turns to the Conformist brother who has done everything by the book but is every bit as lost as his brother ever was. As Fr Henri Nouwen tells us in his reflection, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (1992, p. 71): “Outwardly the elder son was faultless. But when he confronted his father’s joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. Suddenly there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, proud, unkind selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden.”

Without realizing it, the older brother has gone off to a “strange land” just like the Rebel. He was no longer the faithful son of his father everyone thought he was. As his father’s eldest son, his place would be at the center of

the festive gathering, seeing that everyone was welcomed and cared for. Hospitality was – and remains to this day – one of the most important activities in a Middle Eastern household. Refusing to take part made the Conformist the exact opposite of what he appeared to be: the faithful image of his father. He had no cause to look down on his brother; he too had fallen victim to “the tyranny of the passions” (St. Maximos the Confessor) and publicly insulted his father by his actions. He not only refused to stand at his father’s side before the guests; he even caused his father to leave them in order to deal with his son’s feelings.

Like the Pharisee in last week’s Gospel parable, the Conformist brother represents the scribes and Pharisees who are outwardly faultless. They observe all the precepts of the Law but look down on those who do not. The Lord Jesus does not tell them to ignore the Law, but to complete it with mercy and compassion. Elsewhere we find Him berating the Pharisees for this very reason: “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others*” (Mt 23:23).

Are We Scribes and Pharisees?

The brothers in this parable represent two types found in our society today. There are independent individualists who are determined to “fulfill themselves,” to make their own way according to their own lights. There are also people who conform to the expectations of their family or society, seeking to earn the approval of their peers or the powers-that-be.

In the Church there are always people who equate being a good Christian with doing all the “right” things. Consciously or unconsciously, they use their acts of external righteousness to mask their unrighteous hearts. In the words of Metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol, Cyprus (the “Father Maximos” of *The Mountain of Silence*), “...we went to the shrines, we venerated, we took out our money and placed it in a box, we left our candles, our oil, our prayers, our names, our prosphoron, everything... But our hearts did not change at all. Having completed our duties, we are the same as we were before. We are ready to attack one another, ready to testify against each other, ready to be sour just as we were before. Our hearts do not change... I confess to you from my own experience that I have not seen worse enemies of the Church than ‘religious’ people” (from *Therapy for the Sickness of Pharasaim*). As the Lord said, “*these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.*”

What Happens Next?

The parable ends without an ending. We are not told how the older brother responded to his father because the goal of the parable is that we examine what *we* would do. St John Chrysostom said, “Almost any noble person can weep with those who weep but very few of us can rejoice with those who rejoice.” Very few of us can really rejoice in the salvation of another... But how happy is the man who can rejoice in the salvation of his brother, who rejoices over his brother’s repentance more than his own well-being.”

The approaching Great Fast gives us an opportunity to care for the salvation of others. People attend the Liturgy or Lenten services who are not worshippers during the rest of the year. Do we invite our less fervent fellow-parishioners to worship with us during this season? Do we welcome them as returning brethren with love? Or do we say things like, “Oh, look who’s back – so you remembered how to get here!” A better approach might begin by reflecting on the attitude of the loving Father in today’s parable, an icon of Christ Himself.

From St Cyril of Alexandria

“What is the object of this parable? Let us examine the occasion which led to it; in this way we shall learn the truth. The blessed Luke said a little before concerning Christ, the Savior of us all, “*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” Since the Pharisees and scribes were making an outcry on account of His gentleness and love for mankind, wickedly and impiously blaming Him for receiving and teaching people whose lives were impure, Christ set before them this present parable to show them clearly that the God of all requires even the person who is thoroughly steadfast and firm, who knows how to live in a holy manner, and has attained the highest praise for his sober conduct to be earnest in following His will, that when any are called to repentance – even if they are the most blameworthy – he must rejoice and not give way to a loveless irritation on their account.”

(*Commentary on the Gospel of St Luke*, Sermon 107)