

THE STORY OF THE PRODIGAL CHILD. (Lk 15:11-32)

“All our attention must be centered on the parable of the Prodigal Son. We all see ourselves in it as in a mirror.” (St John of Kronstadt, 1829-1908)

The parable of the Prodigal Son, recorded in St Luke's Gospel, is one of the more commonly known segments of the New Testament. Although the word “prodigal” does not occur in the sacred text, the image of the wasteful son, either as squanderer or penitent, has passed into our language. We have all heard it said of someone, “He was a real prodigal son, that one!” or “He's come home just like the prodigal son!”

Before we consider the parable itself, there are two things to keep in mind: **First**; although we speak of the Prodigal Son, Jesus told the story without any title. The message of the story applies just as much to women as to men. Perhaps prodigal daughters were less common in first century Jewish society than, unhappily, they are in our time. Some prefer to think of the parable as that of the Prodigal Child. **Second**; whilst he does not assume a decisive role 'till the latter part of the story, the unfolding drama and its resolution are very much dependent upon the character of the father. Thus, some others speak of it as the Parable of the Merciful Father.

For first century Jewish society the ungrateful son goes almost as far as he dares – he demands his inheritance (almost as if wishing his father were dead): he goes to a far country, probably a land of pagans, leaving family and home: he wastes his inheritance on loose living amongst his new found friends – and when it seems that things could not be worse, he is forced to be a pig herder, even to the point of wishing he could eat the pigs' food! To the Jewish mind he has become almost less than human; he has given up all that he had, and for what? - to live with unclean animals. A devout family might have even observed the prescribed seven days of mourning for him as for one who had died.

Yet at the moment of utmost degradation, almost at the point of despair, something happens deep within his soul. There is a moment of *μετάνοια* – *metanoia*, a complete about-face, a U-turn. He says to himself, “I will *arise*” – *ἀνάστασις*, it is for him a resurrection, *ἀνάστασις*, *anastasis*, - a return from the dead. (keep in mind the father's words in v. 24.)

And that return – driven by the desire to live as before, indeed to live again – is seen by the father while the boy is still at a distance; and it is the father who comes out to meet him. Without any hesitation it is the father who “ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly.” (v 20) All the son had to do was to resolve to return to the house of his father; that place wherein the father kept watch in love, kindness and mercy.

Notice that the father says nothing to the prodigal, but rather orders that he be dressed as befits a son of such a household. In the expression “the best robe”- *στολήν τὴν πρώτην* - *πρώτην* (*protin*) – can also be translated as the *first* robe, in the sense of the *original* robe. The father is thus saying, “Dress him as he was before he went away. Let it be as if nothing has happened.” It is not a case of “the clothes make the man”, but rather his clothes now tell us the most important thing about him – he is the son who has come home! Perhaps the father had lovingly folded up his son's robe and put it aside in hope of that very day, the day of his return.

(It would be a profitable exercise to read as a mind and soul refresher the Melkite Byzantine baptismal service with its references our baptismal robes.)

Often, and for reasons aplenty, each of us has strayed from the House of our Father. And frequently there is an unspoken, and often tragic, story that accounts for the sad circumstances in which we see many of our fellow human beings. Indeed, if we were to know even a few of the reasons why so many are in a “far country”, our hearts would break for grief!

Would that we were honest enough – with ourselves and with God, to make our confession that of the Prodigal Child, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.”

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of this story is in the sullen behaviour of the stay-at-home son. St Basil the Great considers it in this way, “Do you feel happiness, warmth and gratitude when someone that’s not family or a friend receives mercy that doesn’t seem to deserve it, or a blessing that doesn’t seem to have worked for it? Or do you feel anger and jealousy because you don’t feel you received the same amount of mercy? Because you have had to work for everything you’ve got? I know I sometimes do too. But we don’t have to be jealous. We can instead choose to see the love and mercy we have, see the love that’s always here for us if we simply open the eyes of our hearts to it. It is there my brothers and sisters. As often as we stumble and repent. As often as we get lost, through the humility of the prodigal son we always know the way home.” (St Basil, *On the Prodigal Son*)

But I can almost hear someone say, “For me it’s too late; it’s been too long.” As we read this parable, did you not notice that Jesus does not say how long the son was in a country far from home. The father did not embrace his son whilst clutching a diary and calendar! Although it would seem a longer period of time – time to make bad friends; time to waste an inheritance; time to lose everything! – in many ways, it does not matter because throughout that time, however long or short, forgiveness was near at hand...and that same forgiveness remains ever present for us.

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