SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON Luke 15:11-32

Last week we opened the service book called the Lenten Triodion, which will take us through the Great Fast and these preparatory weeks, in which we are now, to the threshold of Pascha. The Gospel reading for the first Sunday which you heard last week expounds the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee who go up to the temple to pray. One is characterised by his sense of pride and contempt for the other. He gives thanks to God that he is not like other men in that he keeps the Jewish Law to the letter and he exudes a sense of superiority and overbearing confidence in his spiritual accomplishments. The other, a tax collector is so ashamed of his actions that he cannot even approach the entrance to the temple but stands far off. He does not dare to lift up his face to heaven but can only cry out “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” The Lord says that the tax collector goes home justified rather than the other because of his humility.

Today we come to the point where we are asked to be like the tax collector in his humility and in order to reach that place we are given an account of repentance or turning back to God by changing our mind. There is an interesting phrase in popular culture which we frequently hear in the media and contemporary society, “I need to sort myself out”, or in French “il faut changer mes idées” which is exactly what Lent is about; some call it a kind of inner spring clean and if I may add hopefully with a Dyson or a Miele since they clean much more efficiently. This is exactly what happens to the younger brother in the story when, as the text says, “he comes to himself”. He goes back to the point where he went wrong and starts again.

But I would like to look at one of the other characters in the story as well, namely the father. It is interesting to see how he reacts when the younger son goes to him and demands his share of the property as he can, according to the law. The text says nothing about this but his subsequent actions and the measure of his joy indicate very clearly that he knows he is staring at somebody who is going to squander his inheritance and destroy himself at the same time. “He was dead”, he later exclaims. And yet he honours the freedom and right of the son to decide for himself as God does with us if we decide to reject him. No doubt like the Mother of God in the temple when she receives a prophecy from Righteous Simeon the father experiences a sword piercing his own heart too. He cannot rest for fear of what may befall the son. Obviously he prays ceaselessly for his son and constantly goes far out on the road looking for and hoping that his lost son will return. When Lent begins in two weeks time and we begin to read the prophecies of Isaiah we shall read about the sufferings, groanings and frustrations of God with his people Israel who have abandoned him despite everything he has done for them, amongst other blessings bringing them out of bondage in Egypt and leading them to a land where they can settle and multiply. It reads like a husband who has lost his wife or a wife her husband. He or she simply cannot forget the other. This gives us some insight into the anguish of the father in the story and some idea of God’s longing for us to return to him. In every sense this is a very human story in which we can all identify intimately with the feelings of the father.

But there is something very clear in the thinking of the prodigal. He realises that the life he enjoyed back home is far superior to that which he has lived since leaving home and he quickly decides to return to his father’s house. As an excuse for returning as an abject failure he reasons something like this: Because of what I have done, squandering all your money and on such dissolute living I am no longer worthy to be called your son, so treat me like one of your hired hands. This is all I ask. But the terms on which he will return are not those by which his father lives. Already he has been waiting for this miracle to happen. He is waiting for this son to return and the joy which he experiences is overwhelming and totally unexpected by his son. It is the reaction of the elder brother which the prodigal expects to receive; contempt, envy and resentment. But the father celebrates the return with unimaginable joy echoing the words of Christ “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

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In the vespers service for last night in one of the hymns we hear the words, “He restored to the Prodigal the tokens of his proper glory.” Like him we are not restored to the status of a hired hand but to the full status of a son, a son of God. These words remind us also of the power of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and as St John writes in his first letter, which we read on Thursday this week, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”. In Lent we shall read in the prophecies of Isaiah, “I shall not remember their sins”. The father’s forgiveness is total. Any memory of feeling wronged melts before his joy at recovering his lost son. Let us be honest with ourselves and admit that we can more easily identify our feelings with those of the elder brother.

There is a distinct note of assurance in these passages that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, which gives us the confidence which we should have before God especially at this time of year. This confidence comes from examining our lives in all humility; retracing our steps over the day and our past as far as we are able and to the degree to which the Holy Spirit reveals the sins of our past and present to us in order to bring and confess them before God. This is what we pray in every service of the Church. “O Holy One visit and heal our infirmities for thy name’s sake.” And in two weeks time we shall be faced with the act of mutual forgiveness, which again is another key to the Great Fast and our journey into finding God more deeply within ourselves.

I spoke about the freedom which God allows us to go where we want like the Prodigal Son in today’s parable. Far deeper is the freedom which we receive from God in removing the burdens of what weighs us down spiritually i.e. our sins through confession and repentance. This indeed is a source of joy and a great gift, which with the help of the Holy Spirit we shall experience like the son with his father in the parable.

May God grant us this gift both now and in the weeks of the coming fast.

*28th February 2021*

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