

Prodigal Son

February 15, 2015

Glory be to God for all things. What a joyful thing it is that we are able to be here together this morning to worship the Holy Trinity and commune with Jesus Christ. May his blessing touch each of our hearts today, nourishing within us all that is good and beautiful and holy – Amen.

Today, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, is dedicated to our study of this great parable given to us by Jesus himself. The church sets this story before us as an aid in our preparation for the Great Lenten fast. The original telling of this story by Jesus was, however, not intended for that purpose. He told this parable against the Pharisees who were complaining that he ‘received’ sinners and even shared meals with them. From early times, though, the church recognized in the story of the Prodigal Son a model of repentance.

Lent has often been called a ‘school of repentance.’ In the Orthodox Church this term repentance has a deep and very important significance and meaning that is quite different than the more common understanding of repentance having to do with people’s moral conduct. That understanding of repentance, what we might call elementary repentance, is what happens when people see that they have done something bad or wrong and desire to correct themselves.

This idea of repentance is not at all unique to Christianity although Christianity also includes within its tradition a moral ethical teaching and various means for addressing moral problems and failings. In the Orthodox Church we see this at work in the daily struggle to live according to Christ’s commandments (his standard of right and wrong), our way of worship and the mystery of sacramental confession. We recognize that our moral falls and failings cause harm not only to others but to our own souls as well. Rightly practiced, our faith produces in us an ever increasing desire to live rightly towards God and our neighbor. It also produces an increasingly sensitive conscience about such things. In a strange way, the more we get ‘better’ as Christians the more frequently we find ourselves utilizing the church’s therapy of confession.

There is, however, another deeper and particularly Christian dimension of repentance that is central to the purpose and practice of Great Lent and with the practice of Christianity itself. This repentance concerns itself with the problem of human alienation from God, with the fact we all find ourselves in a far country, like the Prodigal Son. Father Alexander Schememann describes this problem exceptionally well:

“It is easy indeed to confess that I have not fasted on the prescribed days, or missed my prayers, or became angry. It is quite a different thing, however, to realize suddenly that I have defiled and lost my spiritual beauty, that I am far from my real home, my real life, and that something precious and pure and beautiful has been broken in the very texture of my existence.... All of this I have lost, all of this I am losing all of the time, not only in particular sins and transgressions but in the sin of all sins: the deviation of my love from God, preferring the far country to the beautiful home of my father.”

This estrangement from God is, according to the Christian vision of reality, the human problem of all human problems. It may be that we “believe” that but we also need to admit the fact that we seldom, if ever, really feel the anguish of this alienation from God’s kingdom or of the progressive spiritual darkening of our hearts and minds. We may have straightened out some of our more obvious moral problems and accepted a routine that includes going to church. We may try to be good people, but let’s face it, most of our attention is wrapped up in the affairs of this world – the far country. That is where we still live.

So what is going to create in us the feeling, the coming to his senses, that the Prodigal Son demonstrates? In his case life in the far country became unbearable so perhaps we should just wait until life gets so hard and unpleasant for us that in desperation we turn to God. This has certainly happened for some people. Human beings, however, are amazingly resilient and adaptable and all of us tend to work full time at making the best of this world that we can. And, frankly, the majority of us succeed at doing so, some more, some less.

Knowing all of this the church has given us Great Lent. The Lenten services particularly have a great ability to remind us of what humanity has lost, to help us

come to our senses and recognize this world for the far country that it really is. It is through the Triodion, the special prayers, hymns and scripture readings of such services as the Canon of St. Andrew, the pre-sanctified liturgies and vigils that the church seeks to awaken in us a genuine longing for return which is the essential pre-condition for the deep repentance that is itself one of the great mysteries of Christianity. For as we are reminded, a mysterious thing begins to happen – we begin to remember something that we have had no prior experience of (at least the first time). Somehow another world opens up to us. One we had never previously known yet seems to us in that moment to have always been our true home.

This experience changes us, brothers and sisters. It does not change us completely, but little by little, year by year as we return to the Paschal pilgrimage of Lent, it changes us.

We will never complete our return in this life but we must begin the journey in this life. The fathers teach that repentance begun in this life will continue in the next life. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Again, Father Schememann puts the matter more clearly than I could ever hope to do. "A far country", he says, "it is the unique definition of our human condition.... A man who has never had that experience, be it only briefly, who has never felt that he is exiled from God and from real life, will never understand what Christianity is about." Did you hear that? Without this experience we do not really know what our faith is all about! He goes on, "And the one who is perfectly at home in this world and its life, who has never been wounded by the nostalgic desire for another reality, will not understand repentance."

All right. That is our lesson on repentance for today. Next week we will take a look at the Last Judgment and how repentance ties into that. Please, however, think about the things we have talked about today and try not to forget them. You will need them next week. May God grant that we gather again at that time to continue our preparation for the Great Fast.