

Luke 15: 11-32
“ The Prodigal Son ”

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of those teachings of the Gospel that even non-Christian's are familiar. Everyone knows the story of the prodigal son: the son disobeys his father and spends his inheritance on hedonistic living and winds up poor and hungry, regrets his decision and humbly returns back to his father begging his forgiveness. Everyone knows this part of the story - not all however know how the story ends – with the father unconditionally forgiving the son.

As we consider this familiar parable, let us try to look at it freshly from the eyes of the Fathers of the Church. All of the Fathers interpret the parable using a great deal of symbolism, revealing great truths not only about our relationship with God, who everyone realizes is symbolized by the father of the parable; but is also reveals much about our common nature and the spiritual struggle common to us all.

It would take hours to discuss each symbol of the parable so let's take just of few of them. The two sons are viewed in various ways, interestingly all the Fathers see them as being man in the garden of Eden before and after the fall. This is very profound and very important and we'll come back to it because it will need some unpacking. For now it is sufficient that most fathers also agree the younger son represents those 'sinners' Jesus has come to save. Now of course they, like we, are all sinners. What Jesus, and the fathers, mean by 'sinners' of course are those who know and do not try to hide from the fact that they are sinners. And really, if you're a harlot or tax-collector, you have no place to hide anyway. You know, and everyone knows you're a sinner.

The older son is seen as those who see themselves as righteous – and in the Gospels that is going to be the Pharisees mostly. Again, what was said about the 'sinners,' in principle is

true for them as well: it really isn't about those who are sinners or who are righteous, it is about how a person sees himself. In the case of the righteous then, it is those who see themselves as righteous. And just as the tax-collectors and the harlots can't really hide from the community's judgment of them being sinners, the Pharisees, because of all the good they do and the correct teaching they embrace, even if they wanted to (and most of them don't) they would have a hard time not seeing themselves as righteous – because that is certainly how the community sees them.

The inheritance the young man has received from his father is the virtues, the commandments, all the teaching and tradition – everything he needs to live a life pleasing to God. Unlike the elder son who has held onto his virtues and the way of God and protected it, the younger son has thrown it away in the pursuit of pleasure and autonomy. He's going to do it his way. He'll decide what is right and wrong and he'll make his own fortune – he doesn't need what he got from His father.

Conversely we see the elder brother has been faithful and kept all that his father has given him. He has not left. He has not cast aside his inheritance. He has been absolutely faithful and he and everyone else knows it. He has done everything he's been asked and asked for nothing in return – it is enough for him to just do the work he has been given to do and know he is without fault.

This is the point where the fathers' reference to man in the garden comes in. Man was created pure and without sin. As we have said, he doesn't possess virtue in his nature (only God does), but he was created with the faculties that allow him the ability to choose, to decide for himself what he will do – as is seen so clearly with the Prodigal son. And just as important as his ability to decide is the created faculty, or really the presence or deep awareness of his purpose as a creature to be Godlike. To be a mediator between creation, as a creature, and God – as one who is able *to be by grace all that God is by nature* (St. Athanasius). The father's call this faculty or awareness of his purpose man's *Logos*. Which can mean word (Jesus as the Logos of God), and it can also mean 'reason,' – specifically, reason for being.

The plan for man in the garden, according to the Fathers, (esp. St. Maximus the Confessor) was for man through voluntary obedience to God, in keeping the fast from the tree of knowledge of good and evil among other things He had given them to do, was to grow in purity and obedience and to mature to the point where they realized their full potential as man. And as a fully mature man they would learn the two greatest truths: man is not God and never will be – God is the only God. And God loves mankind.

The prodigal in trying to be his own God (his own father) harms his soul and harms other people. And all that he has lost he is going to have to work hard to regain. Notice the father is so gentle He stops him from asking to be made a servant and instead reinstates him as his son and heir – but he doesn't give him back his inheritance – only his place as his son. He's going to have to work for that. He's going to have to fix all that he's broken and find all that he's lost.

And yet, through repentance, the prodigal is aware of what he's done. He knows *what* he's lost and he knows *why* he's lost it. He knows he's not God and he regrets trying to be God. He regrets having hurt his father and having hurt his relationship with his father. And so, he's ready to begin the work of obedience again, but now as he does so, he does

so freely with love and gratitude and thankfulness – and he does it with the humility of one who knows his purpose. He is not God (he is not the father), but he is loved! And the knowledge and experience of that love will sustain him in the hard work ahead.

The older son, as with the Pharisees' they represent we've seen week after week, are obedient and faithful but they believe the light of their righteousness is their own. They are therefore obedient to themselves, serving themselves rather than God. And because of that they love themselves (the self-love, *philaufitia* that we've spoken of earlier). They are as self-absorbed as the prodigal. The difference of course being that the Prodigal, in rebelling, learned the folly of disobedience AND unrepentance, whereas, while it is true the older son was ignorant of the former, he was also ignorant of the latter. And in that ignorance all his obedience will not help him because as he and all those of Israel know: *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.* (James 4)

All who are self-absorbed and self-righteous are not aware of the father's love. They don't feel his love. Their relationship with him is a burden. It's a chore. It's all work. It's why they react the way they do with anger and indignation and pride. They don't care about their brother and they don't care about the father – it's about them!

We're about to enter Great Lent. It is a time where we're going to be asked to sacrifice and work. We have to decide very soon what we're going to do. Are we going to try to keep the fast in the best way we can and build an inheritance or are we going to just do whatever we want to do? And if we do try to build this inheritance, if we choose to be obedient are we going to do it freely and willingly for God and with God, or will it be about us? We need to really think about it because the time is almost upon us.

People often ask what the point of Great Lent and all this fasting and repentance is. The goal is really rather simple: to experience God as God (which can only happen in repentance) and to experience being loved by God: the reason or *Logos* of being human.