

Thoughts from Fr Michael... We are all Prodigals

Perhaps the best well known parable of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or as it is sometimes called the Parable of the Lost Son; "Lost" because it is the third parable in Chapter 15 of Luke that deals first with a lost sheep and secondly with a lost coin. As with the lost sheep and the lost coin when found the shepherd and the woman rejoice and invite friends to celebrate. And so it is with the "father" who throws a banquet for the recovery of the "Lost Son."

Chances are that is why the Parable of the Prodigal Son is so well remembered; there is a partial happy ending; partial I say because the older brother is not happy about the celebration. Most of us, I think, also remember the parable because we identify with the Prodigal Son.

We all, sons and daughters, are Prodigals. We want our freedom, we want to set out on our own, we want to escape the constraints our parents have established for their home, we want to experience life, and we want to be independent.

Except for a small number like Benjamin Franklin who left his Boston family to strike out on his own in Philadelphia and did extremely well, most sons and daughters find being alone and cut off from family like Theodore Dreiser's **Sister Carrie** the beginning of a downward spiral of suffering and pain.

And so it was with the Prodigal Son. To exacerbate the situation with the Prodigal Son, Christ has him ask his father for his inheritance before the father's death: "'Father, give me the portion of goods that fall to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood." The father had to separate half his estate and give it to him while still alive. Can you imagine doing that to your children before your will is probated? Yet, the father out of respect for his son's freedom gladly does so. An amazingly loving father!

Because word of this uncommon transaction spreads through the village the son is not well regarded and "not many days after [he received his inheritance before its time] the son gathered all together [and] journeyed to a far country." In other words, he was not welcomed in his village.

Off he goes and with a fair amount of wealth. Can you imagine what it was like for him? He had money to burn, and to spend it on material goods and pleasure. There is an old saying: "a fool and his money are soon parted." And so it was with the Prodigal Son. It is not hard to imagine that scoundrels and frauds and sweet talking women saw this sucker coming.

"But, when he had spent all, there was a great famine in that land, and he began to be in want." Where were all his new friends? Was there no one on whom he had spent money lavishly willing to befriend him? He was all alone – hungry, poor, and without shelter. Have we at any time experienced betrayal?

“Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.” Agreeing to feeding swine, an unclean and despised animal for a Jew, is an act of utter desperation. This arrogant, haughty, rich son is now penniless, and for food and shelter engaged in a most despicable occupation.

Haven't we all experienced some desperate situations where we were anxious about our next meal or how we would pay our bills? We can empathize with the Prodigal Son. We could not stay in that situation, and neither could the Prodigal Son. As he thought about his recent life and what he had done and how he had come to this place, he remembered his father's home. There were better times. There was a safer place. There were people who loved him.

As the Lord puts it: “when he came to himself.” In other words, when he came to his senses, he realized that his father's servants were better off than he was now, and decided to return to his father and ask to be treated as a servant knowing that he had embarrassed his father and could no longer be called his son. He was, however, unprepared for his father's response. “When he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.” Then the father put a robe on him, a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet and called for a banquet to rejoice, “for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” Truly heart-warming!

Why is this parable read during the pre-Lenten period? What lesson does this have for us?

We are all prodigals for we all have left our Father, our God, to be attracted to worldly material objects and sensuous pleasures. Because it is clear that the Parable Christ relates about the Prodigal Son is really about us and God the Father who unconditionally loves and who honors us with our freedom, but who recognizes that we will stray. He is, moreover, always ready to welcome us “home” when we come to our senses and repent and return to Him. Like the wandering of the Prodigal Son He is anxious for us to be reunited with Him, and to forgive our trespasses.

As parents who wonder about the choices our children have made, do we not pray that they will come to their senses and remember the loving home in which they were raised and return. How many of us worry about the choices our children have made? We can take comfort that someday they will see the light and return to us and to God. But, it may be after we are dead. Sometimes it takes our passing for children to appreciate what they have lost. Are not we told: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”? [Prov 22:6]

But, what about us? Have we come to our senses and returned to God and His expectations of us?

Lent is a time set aside to ponder our relationship to God, to reflect on our obligations to Him and to each other, to repent of our wondering ways and our attraction to transitory things and people, and to return to our God who gave Himself for us and is waiting for us to answer His knock on the door of our hearts. “Behold, I stand at the door, [Jesus says]

and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he will be with Me.” [Rev 3:20]

Let us take this year’s Lenten period to “come to our senses” and return to God, our Father, who is anxiously awaiting us to welcome us back home.

May we all experience a sobering Lent, or as the late Fr Alexander Schmemmann describes it; “A Bright Sadness.”