

Sunday of the Prodigal Son (34)

On this Sunday by means of a Gospel parable, from which it received its name and the very Sunday, the Holy Church, for the rousing of repentance for those who are bound by sinful habits, those who cannot and do not want to be freed from it, represents a disastrous condition of man, who is withdrawn from God; and for the consolation and encouragement of those who, being depressed by the consciousness of the weight of their sins, fall into hopelessness and despair, presents an image of repentance of the depraved son and the inexhaustible mercy of the Heavenly Father, Who accepts all sinners who repent. The deeply edifying Gospel Parable of the Prodigal Son with special clarity shows to what an awful degree the flesh prevails over the spirit, and to what sensuality the soul can reach over the highest aspirations, and to what an unfathomable abyss of sin a man may be thrown into, who submits to self will, who takes a great interest in carnal desires, who overthrows in himself the good yoke of the law of God, and who submits to an unrestrained will in sensual pleasures. The true joy of life consists only in the beneficial union with God. The distance from this union serves as the source of all possible troubles and humiliations.

However these troubles are not continual for that sinner, who has not yet completely deadened his conscience, who has not reached complete despair in the persistence and hardness in his sins, and finally has not fallen under the authority of the devil. The love of the Heavenly Father does not leave him and then, when he wanders on the path of vice, not thinking about returning under his father's roof, when he slumbers in the embrace of vanity and of earthly sweetness, not noticing the abysses under him, which his passions attract. The grace of God does not cease to call upon him: that voice of love and mercy, that by fear of foreboding and threats, through the mouths of the holy prophets and apostles, touching and softening the heart by its many diverse benefactions, that by striking with tribulations and calamities, that awaking his conscience by especially significant events and meetings, that shaking all his being by such occurrences in life which involuntarily awakens his conscience, that sobers his mind, that strikes his heart with the fear of God, fear of judgment and of torture. The Lord Jesus Christ, according to his own promise, stands before the doors of his heart and knocks, that he opens the door to Him and receives Him into the room of his soul. And here the sinner wakes up from his spiritual slumber and from there comes to the idea that his unique rest is in God.

To strengthen us all in this saving idea in order to wake all of us from the spiritual drowsiness in which all of us are more or less immersed during the usual course of our life, our habitual pleasures and entertainments, our many anxious cares of everyday life, thoughtlessly breaking the commandments of God and

carelessly continuing in our sinful ways, not suspecting that this path can result in our death, the Holy Church also changes the chants for this day into one continuous repentant prayer of our souls crying out to the Lord. With the human soul orally enslaved by sin the Holy Church appeals to the Lord: "let us not look outside of ourselves", "subjected by corrupting thoughts", "I impiously worshipped the pleasures of the body, and I attached myself to the inventors of passions", "having departed from your commandments", "I have become subject to an evil demon", "I have squandered the wealth of your gifts of grace, I have become dissolutely evil, O Savior", "I have been filled with every shame", "I have become enslaved to every evil"; "now I repent and I cry out in humility: I have sinned against You, accept me, O King of all", "my impoverished heart do not despise", "cast me not away from Thy presence", "by Your wind of merciful love blow away the web of my deeds", "lead me out from passions", "Open to me now your fatherly compassions as I return from evil deeds", "Be compassionate to me, O Savior, most heavenly Father, as I flee to Your many compassions", "have mercy on me" and "save me"; "See, O Christ, the affliction of my heart, see my conversion, see my tears, O Savior, and do not despise me. But embrace me once again through your compassion and number me with the multitude of the saved, that with thanksgiving I may sing the praise of your mercies".

The depth and power of this repentant prayerful cry to awaken everyone from the condition of spiritual drowsiness and to force the entry of the strict investigation into the depth of the heart, to place the conscience in the sight of the law of God, before the dreadful throne and impartial judgment of God, in order to see that our heart lives and moves, that consists of the main subject of its attachments and aspirations, its desires and hopes, in order to enter into itself, to see its impiety, to know its guilt before the Heavenly Father and to fall down before the throne of His mercy with tears of prayer for the remission of sins and for the sending down of grace for correction. The one who has this spiritual awakening, this feeling of discontent with oneself and the desire to improve, this consciousness of danger of one's sinful condition and heavy guilt before God, this premonition of a menacing death and one's lack of an answer before the judgment of God will stir up a sincere disgust at the life of sin, the firm decision to convert to God with one's whole heart, the fervent desire to bring a sincere, heart felt repentance, and a holy decision not to again return to sin and turning with fervent prayer to God for the remission of sins and for the sending down of grace for correction, all this is, really, that grace alone proceeds from the meeting of the Lord and the reconciliation with Him triumphs, as if one were not a sinner.

Thus, having shown on the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee the true beginning of repentance, the Holy Church now in the Gospel parable opens it to him with full power: under the condition of true humility and sincere repentance

for the mercy of God the remission of the heaviest sins from God is possible. And consequently the sinner, in view of the approach of the time for repentance, must not despair for the beneficial help and mercies.

Kontakion, tone 3

**I have recklessly forgotten Thy glory, O Father;
And among sinners I have scattered the riches which Thou gavest me.
And now I cry to Thee as the prodigal:
I have sinned before Thee, O merciful Father;
Receive me a penitent
And make me as one of Thy hired servants.**

(Text: published by the Department of Liturgical Music, OCA)

At Matins for the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, and then also for the Sundays of Meatfare and Cheesefare, after singing the Polielely of the Psalms: "Praise the name of the Lord" and "O give thanks unto the Lord", sing also Psalm 136: "By the rivers of Babylon", "with the beautiful alleluia", i. e. in the known chant with special tenderness, with sweet singing. This psalm arouses in the sinners to understand their unfortunate condition in their captivity in sin and by the devil, similarly to the Jews in captivity in Babylon, who understood their bitter situation and repented, and represents with a sorrowful soul the nostalgic for the heavenly fatherland 1).

Epistle 1 Cor. 6:12-20, sel. 135 **Gospel** Luke 15:11-32, sel. 79

Note 1)

1) The last verse of this psalm: "Blessed shall he be who shall seize and dash thine infants against the rock", in translation means: the one is blessed who has the courage and power to break on the rock of faith the child's sin, i. e. only that which gives birth to evils thoughts, the depraved stirring of the heart, the shameful impulses of the will, before they take possession of his soul.

*S. V. Bulgakov, **Handbook for Church Servers**, 2nd ed., 1274 pp., (Kharkov, 1900) p 0490-2
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