

Sermon
2/24/2008
Sunday of the Prodigal Son

It is most providential that today is not only the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, but also the Sunday when we commemorate the first and second findings of the head of John the Baptist. I say this because last night during Vespers, since it was a feast day of the Forerunner, we were blessed to hear an Old Testament reading from the third chapter of the prophet Malachi. When I reviewed that particular passage, I was amazed at how well the prophet's oracles resonate with today's parable. I would even go so far as to say that our Lord was using Malachi as the framework or foundation for the parable of the prodigal son found in Luke 15:11-32. Let's take a look at both Malachi and the prodigal son, and analyze them and see how they relate and who they speak to us this morning.

To begin, let's look at Malachi 3:5-12. In this passage, we read that God is coming to judge Israel for its sinfulness and wickedness. What was their wrong-doing? The list includes sorcery, adultery, false witness, oppression of hirelings, orphans, and widows, those who reject the stranger, those who do not fear God, and those who do not keep God's statutes such as the crop tithes (Leviticus 27:30) mentioned in verse 8. Because of all of this, the land is cursed by God and a crop failure resulted. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we read about one of two sons who took his half of his inheritance from his Father. He then journeyed to a far country and squandered his money on loose living. Once he had spent everything, once he had completely abandoned his father and had nothing, then a great famine arose in that country which drove the prodigal son into bondage as a pig-feeder – and the pigs ate better than he did!

With this in mind, let us jump back to Malachi for a relevant theological notion. In Malachi 3:6, God states, "For I the Lord do not change...." It is an important fundamental concept of our Orthodox theology that God is changeless. Only that which is created is subject to change; the uncreated God therefore must be changeless. Because of this, God does not change His mind. In other words, God doesn't get mad then get appeased. So, how do we Orthodox understand the wrath of God which is found throughout the Scriptures? It has to do with how we interpret our relationship with God. Simply put, the closer we are to Him, the more we experience just how loving and

merciful He is; the farther we get from Him, the more we experience the unchanging and infinite love of God as wrath and fire. For the Israelites in Malachi, they become so far from God because of their sinful lifestyle and negligence of God's laws that they dragged the land with down with them and as a result everything was cursed. Just like Israel in the book of Malachi, the prodigal son also abandons the "good life" with his father (interpreted as God the Father) for a lifestyle of sin. He ends up getting so far away from God in his fallen away state that even the land around him becomes famine-struck. I'll come back to this concept shortly and explain the connection.

Despite their sinfulness, in Malachi 3:7b and 3:11-12 God calls Israel back home and offers to them a blessing. The Lord states, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Hosts." God then explains that if the Israelites return to Him and fulfill their obligations that he "...will rebuke the devourer for you so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, (...) then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of Hosts." Simple repentance is all that is needed and God will rebuke the cursed situation, the crops will bear fruit, and all nations will call Israel - now a land of delight - blessed!

Interestingly, the prodigal son does just what God calls Israel to do in Malachi! In his despair, the prodigal son returns to the Father. As he does so, the father sees him and goes rushing to meet him. The father robes the son, puts a ring on his finger, kills the fatted calf and they make merry over the return of the "dead" son. What a blessing! Do you see the parallels with the reading from Malachi?

So, what does it mean for us Christians today? It is a call for each and every one of us to assess where we are at in life. Do you feel like you are living with the pigs? Do you feel that you have sold yourself into bondage? Do you feel abandoned by God? Are you unhappy with your spiritual situation in life? Here's the bad news, the problem doesn't lie with God, the Church, the "direction" the church is taking, how many catechumens we have, the priest, the priest's style of preaching, etc. Rather, it lies within each and every one of us and how we, as sinful human beings, squander all the good things that God has given to us in favor of the ungodly life. It is important to add here the Orthodox theological concept that man is a microcosm of the physical and spiritual world that had an original vocation (in Adam) to be a mediator between the two realms.

That teaching is found throughout the Church Fathers. Thus, it can be reasoned, that when we get so caught up in sin we drag the rest of the world down with us and curse our lives, our homes, our churches, and our lands with spiritual famine and sometimes even physical famine. Just look at the planetary environmental crisis if you doubt what I am saying.

Now the good news! Lent is a great time for us to reflect at just how deep in the wallow we are with the pigs and just how we have sold ourselves into sinful spiritual bondage. It's also a time to be prodigal children and turn and run to the Father's loving, merciful, and forgiving embrace. It's so simple; have a meaningful Lent. Fast – willingly, joyfully, and with a purpose. Pray – willingly, joyfully, and with a purpose both at home and during the extra services we do during Lent. Promise God that you will add one extra service a week this year during Lent. Almsgiving – I quote Nike here saying, “Just do it.” Take the money you save on food and luxuries because you are fasting and give it to the poor. Examine yourself – your sins, your agendas, your woes and miseries, and then have a serious, meaningful, Spirit-led, burden-lifting Confession.

May the Holy Spirit lead all of us to be prodigal children of God the Father. Let us in true repentance turn our feelings of God's wrath and abandonment into feelings of God's joy and love, for as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:12). In doing so, we can truly experience blessedness with great feasting on the day when we celebrate Christ's empty tomb and proclaim “Christ is risen.” Glory to Jesus Christ!