

# Excerpts from “The One Thing Needful,”

*Sermons of Archbishop Andrei (Rymarenko, 1893-1978)*

## **Sundays before Lent: The Prodigal Son.**

“Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Mt. 4:17). So the Holy Church called to us three weeks ago. But today the call is the same. The whole question is how do we relate to it. As to words alone? Or as to the great call of Christ’s Church, our Mother, who knows what is awaiting us, and therefore appeals to us, “Repent!”

In other words, look at yourself carefully because a special time is coming. As in physical nature, the bright sun will soon shine and will reveal its warm rays. This will be the action of the Creator of the universe. In the same way, from the Creator of the universe spiritual rays will pour through our souls and will warm us with spiritual warmth. And this warmth and joy will abide with us, if we will be those slaves of the Lord who strive for His Heavenly Kingdom. And these are not just words. During the course of these three weeks, the Church has been convincing us that we must examine ourselves. And she even gives us patterns for examining ourselves.

If you will remember three weeks ago, on Sunday, the Holy Church gave us the Gospel reading about Zacchaeus, about his state of mind as a rich Jew, a tax-collector, who had reached the age when everything he had accumulated through unjust ways, all this proved to be futile because by now his old age refused to use, to take pleasure from what had been amassed through unjust means. By now his old age did not need what he had piled up. There were riches, but the man could not use them anymore because he was physically weak. He no longer needed these riches, but needed the rest required by an old man who is shaking all over, who does not need the kind of life which the human race is living. And the Church gave us the image of this publican so that we would check ourselves: are we not attached to the circumstances in which we live, and are we awaiting that which each human being should await? If so, then we must somehow settle the question by the kind of life we lead. And so, the Holy Church gave us the image of Zacchaeus the Publican three weeks ago.

Then last Sunday, she even more strongly forced us to feel, when she revealed to us the moment of prayer of the Pharisee and the publican who was beating his breast and saying: “God be merciful to me a sinner!” (Lk.18:13). This was as if a continuation of what was told about the publican Zacchaeus. Here helplessness was revealed. As the Gospel said, Zacchaeus repented. Christ had come to him, as it were healed him; but habit of will, a careless and sinful life, was already so enrooted in his consciousness that he did not know what to do, so that from this moment on, his life would not be sinful. And he reached such a state of despair that he stood and said: God, be merciful to me a sinner. I can do nothing. Thou art the Only One Who by Thy divine strength and Thy Grace can help me get out of this difficult situation of a suffering conscience.

And today? Today the Holy Church reveals to us in still more detail the state of society in which we now live. This Sunday we call “The Sunday of the Prodigal Son” (Lk. 15:11-32). It is a brief history. We have heard it and know it. A father had two sons. And the younger son was so insolent in relation to his father that he demanded what he had no right to demand, because it belonged to the father. He came to his father and said, “Give me what belongs to me.” What belonged to him? Nothing belonged to him! But his father was a father: “You want it — here, take it!” In the same way, we are often given when we ask: “Here, take it.” And as Christ relates in the parable, he didn’t stay very long in the place where his father lived. Because he was bored. The riches his father gave him — he needed them only for dissipating his life, for passions, so that he could lose himself in the whirlwind of life.

And he went away, he went far away. Here we must pay attention to each word. In Christ's sayings each word has its meaning. He went far away. And when he had spent everything that he had received on harlots and riotous living, further on it says, at this time a famine arose. It always happens this way. One thing after another. And here, when the famine arose, this unfortunate one, having used up everything he had received from his father, began to starve. And he went to those with whom he had spent his life. They received him, but only sent him into the field to tend a herd of pigs. And looking at the pigs, he himself wanted to eat what the pigs were eating — husks. But even this they didn't give him.

And here, "He came to himself (Lk. 15:17). Pay attention to these words. The Gospel says, "He came to himself." And when he had come to himself then he saw himself. He saw what kind of man he was, and he saw his Father, remembered his homeland. He remembered the conditions of life of his Father, and there arose in his heart a terrible sorrow. He understood that he had hurt his Parent. And in this anguish he was ready to go through anything, any unpleasantness, just to be close to him who had earlier kept him, had given him warmth, caresses. He wanted his Father. But how could he go to him when he had offended him? Now he was ready to accept anything: to be not even a son, but to be like a stranger, just to be near his Father. And so he went.

The parable says that he went far away from his Father. This means that returning was not easy: without money, without provisions, to walk on the scorching sand of the desert. He lived through all this in the hope that his Father would accept him, at least as a kind of hireling, as a man under punishment. But what happened? He was still far from home, but his Father already went out to meet him, opened His arms to embrace him. And here took place that scene which even now stirs many people so much that tears involuntarily fall from their eyes. Here is revealed what a Father can be for his son.

The Holy Church gives us here a brief history of the fall and resurrection of a life. For what purpose? In order to tell us about this incident? No, brothers. But in order to speak to our conscience, to you and me, to each of us, to all our hearts, in whatever state we may find ourselves. In what state are we in relation to our Father, to the Father Who gave us life? Let us look at this dissolute son. Maybe we still haven't spent the riches which the Father gave us. Let us remember what happened to that son. Does our conscience still not speak to us in anguish? Are we still living it up with the inheritance from our Father's riches? Let us remember that we won't be in this state for long — a moment of hunger will come. The property from our Father's inheritance will be used up. Darkness will invade our heart. Our conscience will begin to torment us. Or have we already reached that state where we are ready to feed on "husks," where we are crying in anguish that life is spent, that our life is crippled? And what about our family life? Maybe we have already lost those who were close to us. Maybe even our children are in such a state that torments our conscience.

Here the Holy Church gives us today's parable: let us look at the prodigal son and examine our conscience. Let us look at all the states of this son who lived it up in riches, suffered in poverty, came to a state of despair, and finally reached the state where he came to himself. And he was not mistaken. Because our Father, the Creator, is a good Father. He will forgive everything, will accept us. The only thing we have to do is go to Him. This is it: Go to Him. It is here that we do not have enough strength, because we will have to go back. And we have gone far, far away. We will have to go through the harsh wilderness, with the constant feeling of fear that we will not be accepted.

Through this parable the Holy Church gives us direction: the great days of Christian spring are approaching — Great Lent — the days in which the Church makes it possible for us to open ourselves up, to recognize our sinful condition, to cleanse ourselves with the help of the Sacrament which the Lord will give us in the Tree of Life, in the Body and Blood of Christ, which is given to us in order to enliven us. This Sunday of the Prodigal Son, the Holy Church once again gives us a lesson for our conscience in order to resurrect us so that we come closer to the Father, in order to heal our heart so that we might come to that moment when the Lord will call us, and we will be able to say in the last moment: "Into Thy hands I commend my spirit" (Lk. 23:46).