

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Sermon by Saint Philaret, Metropolitan of NY 1/14 Feb 1971

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is not the first time we have spoken in this sacred church about the impossibility of grasping the unapproachable and incomprehensible nature of the Divinity, concerning which the Church says that "it is impossible for men to see God." God's infinite glory and holiness can not be contemplated even by the holy Angels and Archangels. But the MORAL essence of the Divinity is revealed to us, and thus we know from the Holy Scriptures that God is Love.

It is often said that man can not be an adequate object for divine Love, because there is an immeasurable abyss which lies between creation and the Creator. But there is a power which somehow eliminates this abyss and makes man closer to his Creator: it is love. This can be perceived through this imperfect analogy: Let us Imagine a grown-up and stable man who enjoys a respectable place in society, but who all of a sudden should start to play with soap-bubbles; everyone would laugh. But under different circumstances, this kind of activity would be perfectly understandable. This reliable and responsible worker comes home after a hard day's work, tired and just wanting to rest. He sees his little child at play, and the father begins himself to play with him, forgetting his tiredness and heartily sharing the excitement of his baby son. Why? Because when man loves, then he experiences and loves the same as his friend. Parental love eliminated the difference between a grownup man and a little boy. Of course this is only an imperfect analogy.

But let us turn to the parable of the Prodigal Son, for it reveals to us the mercy of the heavenly Father and His love. The Lord says: "A certain man had two sons, and the younger said to the father, 'Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me'." The father complied with this wish; he divided the property and gave him his part. Then that son decided to leave his father and live for a while as a "free man".

In those times parental power was complete and total, and if the father had not let him go, he would have to stay. But the father did not hold him by force, and the son, taking his part went away. Why did the father let him go and did not force him to remain? Because he realized that his son is tired of his father's protection and if he had not been allowed to go, he would grumble unceasingly. Seeing that it will do him good to be on his own for a while and experience the results, the father lets him go. And he goes "into a far country."

Life offered him all its pleasures, especially the joys of lust, which are so tantalizing to youth... but so dangerous to them. Then he started to misuse his wealth. When a man throws around his money, he has many friends, but when there is no more money, then everyone deserts him. So it happened to him. Deserted by all, penniless, the youngster had to take the job of shepherd; but not just a herder of sheep, but a swineherd. We must remember that according to Mosaic Law pigs were unclean animals, therefore this job was one of the most degrading. The unfortunate young man felt hunger and wanted to eat the husks which were swine's food but was not given even that. Then the youngster came to his senses and recalled: "How many of the hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger." (He says "hired servants" and not "sons" which shows that in his soul there has come a realization of what he did.) Often people repent but do not reform their life; but this

prodigal son, when he realized the depth of his fall, said to himself: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thy hired servants."

He got up and went immediately with mixed emotions: with shame and fear as to how the insulted father will meet him; also with pain from the realization of how he had degraded himself. It is with such torture within his soul he nears his father's home. It is said in the Gospel: "...but when he was yet a great way off" the father saw him. He saw him from far away, because he was waiting for his son. Maybe he walked several times to the road and looked. But when he finally saw him, pitiful, suffering and in disgrace, then, "he had compassion," His fatherly love made him forget everything else, and he ran to meet him and fell on his neck. From the son comes the penitent cry: "Father I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." The father did not let him even finish, but tells the 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 is found."

This is the wonderful parable told by the Only begotten Son of God about the love of His heavenly Father, so that no repenting sinner could ever despair of the Lord's forgiveness. The blessed Augustine said: "If you want to avoid God's anger, then throw yourself Into His embrace." Recall King David, who committed two mortal sins; but when the prophet Nathan accused him and he admitted: "I sinned before the Lord", he immediately heard "And the Lord has also put away thy sin."

The Church places before us this example of true repentance so that no one would doubt that one who repents will be pardoned. St. John Chrysostom said, "The Lord's grace is welded together with repentance." Repent and you will receive it.

Let us remember the tragic fate of the Russian nation, which slipped into a wrong understanding of liberty. We are suffering like the prodigal son, because we wished to do our will Just as he did. But there is another, true liberty, which consists of the liberty to choose between good and evil. In the Old Testament the Lord says: "I have set before you blessing and cursing" and right away He appeals, "...therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."(Deut.30:19) Therefore, true liberty consists in the freedom of man to choose between good and evil, and man is called to offer his freedom unto the fulfillment of God's will.

Before the Fall, Adam easily complied with God's will, but after that it is fulfilled only with great difficulty and strain, because human nature was damaged and darkened through sin, and to fulfill God's will the soul must be corrected and cleansed from this sinful corruption.

Only then, when we submit our will to the will of God, do we find true Christian liberty. Only then can true Christian life begin. By such a life-path the Christian can reach such spiritual perfection and height that his personal life in a way interflows with Divine life, being completely immersed in it. The example of such a spiritual level can be seen in the Apostle St. Paul, who simply says: Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." (Gal. 2:20) Our Great Russian righteous father Fr. John of Kronstadt, called his inspired diary "My life in Christ".

Not to everyone is given the possibility of rising to the heights which were reached by those great people. But their path has to be also our path, and this is the path of service to God in free will.

Amen.