

Sermon of the Third Sunday of Great Lent

The joy of the Father's heart Father Luka Sidaros 31/03/2002

“The parable of the prodigal son was mentioned by our teacher Luke the Evangelist in chapter 15, may his blessing be upon us, Amen.

The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Then He said: “A certain man had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to *his* father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them *his* livelihood. ¹³ And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with ¹⁴prodigal living. ¹⁴ But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the ¹⁶ pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything*.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” ’

²⁰ “And he arose and came to his father. But 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. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ²² ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet. ²³ And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; ²⁴ for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’

²⁸ “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ So he answered and said to *his* father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’

³¹ “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. ³² It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’ ”

Sin is the reason for our separation from God

Our dear beloved, in this parable, Christ revealed God's feelings toward the sinful person. No one knows the Father except the Son, so it was not possible for these secrets to be revealed except by Christ. The relationship between us and God is a relationship between a father and a son. We are God's children and this is the greatest blessing we have received in Christ; the blessing of birth from God; the blessing of sonship we all received equally because we are all born in baptism.

There are many meanings to and seriously negative effects of sin: sin is death; sin is destruction; sin is hardship and fatigue; but the very easy and brief description that expresses the state of sin is that it is separation from God. So, the parable reveals that sin is the alienation of the son from his father; the son took his belongings and went to a far country and settled there.

Therefore sin makes a person estranged from the Lord, and this is of course very harsh—for a person to remain far from our Lord. No matter how much they delude themselves about the existence of the relationship between them and our Lord, these are fantasies and tricks from Satan; instead, understand the word of Christ. Sin separates us from God, makes us distant and alienated, and distance from God is indescribable. If we describe those who are in hell, we find they are those with no relationship with God. So, Hell is when a person completely loses their connection with God, while paradise and heaven are when a person connects and lives with Him.

Do not underestimate sin because it distances you from God, and distance from God means a person loses everything in life.

The dynamics of repentance

The second point is that repentance is a real return, a movement towards God. Sometimes the meaning of repentance is not clear in a person's mind. What does it mean to repent? It means you begin to move away from your alienation, from your separation, move in a way that brings you closer to God.

You may think repentance is just words or prayers, but repentance is a change. If a person prays and does not change or comes to church and does not change, or receives Holy Communion and does not change—if everything remains constant as it is, this person does not repent. 'These people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.' This distant heart and gap are due to sin. So, if a person does not change, their worship is invalid.

When the son said, "I will get up and return to my father," it means he did not stay where he was, because there is no repentance as long as a person remains in a far country, settled there and pleased with a life of sin. If a person repeats days, repeats their sins, and repeats their life, they do not repent. The main and essential part of repentance is change, for a person to stop being in the same place.

Do not think repentance is a theoretical idea; repentance is a practical movement. If you find a person in dynamic movement, then they are on their way to repentance. If place, habits, language, and way of life all change, then repentance has begun. But a person often wishes and desires to repent, but does not make an effort or move, so at that time it simply becomes a wish. 'I remember the old days...when I was in glory in my father's house. I remember the freedom; the blessings. I remember the innocence, purity, and holiness, I keep remembering and regretting.' This is not repentance, only wishes. Do you think this wealth and those blessings are no longer there? Go back! The Father is present; the Father's house is present; glory and paradise are present... Go back; repentance begins when a person moves. He moves his feet, so that the distance between him and the Father begins to decrease.

The Father's heart

Is it possible to describe the father's heart towards his distant son? If we imagine—but it is a practical reality—a man whose son has moved away, who knows his son is missing and has lost his way. What is the pain inside his heart like? Can the father's heart be described? It is impossible. But even this is considered one millionth of what passes through the heart of God the Father toward us. When a son is reckless, we always hear the father saying, 'My heart breaks for my son.' We hear that, but who knows what is inside his heart, and the indescribable form these feelings in the father's heart take? This is the heart of the Father towards us. I disregard sin. I lie, steal, covet, run after the world, after the lusts of the flesh, and various kinds of sin, but do you know the feelings of the Father's heart toward you? Can you describe these feelings when the lost prodigal son returned to his father? Indescribable, believe me. Our Father Bishoy Kamel always used to say, "Let us bring joy to the heart of the Father," for God does not desire the death of the sinner, dear beloved, nor is He pleased with the death of the sinner.

The dignity of repentance

With this parable, Christ revealed the meaning of return and repentance, and He expressed the extent of the father's joy and the joy of all of heaven when he said, "Let us rejoice and celebrate." He was referring to the heavenly hosts, the angels, and all the saints in all of heaven when they rejoice over one of us who repents. When there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, this means repentance is a crucial act...but we are lazy. We cannot comprehend the dignity of repentance, for it is the greatest deed done on the face of the earth; however, repentance must be true. As for attempts to repent, these are not repentance. If a person gets used to lying and attempts to stop lying or uttering false words; or if a person tries not to steal,

these are all attempts; but true repentance is when a person returns from a far country to his father's bosom.

Sin destroys all human wealth

In a far country, a person loses everything. Every day I spend away from God is a loss. Every day a person lives in sin is a huge loss until he loses everything. Suppose, for example, a person has property and money, but then is faced with circumstances where they lose everything. What are their feelings? They used to have a lot; now they have nothing. This is the case when sin destroys all the good in a person. You may say, 'Before, I had many blessings; my heart was kind and full of goodness. I had many blessings; I was a holy, pure, and very innocent person. I had true love for all my brothers; I had humility; I did not have a feeling of self or ego; I had a lot of goodness.' But sin destroys all that is good, and a person continues to lose.

In this gospel, Christ says, "When he spent everything...he began to want." The son lost everything he had. I wish every one of us would examine themselves well and remember what they had in childhood and how much of their spiritual life they lost after they walked the path of the world. They lost so much that they craved to eat the food of this world; the food of impurity. They craved it but no one provided it. They crave to fill their stomachs, but can anyone fill their stomach with sin? Does sin satisfy them? The loss is great, and if a person is honest with themselves, they will find the loss due to sin is very grave, and irreparable.

Christ is the hope for sinners

But thanks be to God, dear beloved, that Christ opened the door of repentance for you, to compensate you for all that was lost. I wasted a lot; I wasted years of my life in impurity, in stubbornness and in distance from God; is it possible for him to accept me? Indeed He accepts me... Our Christ is the Christ of hope for sinners. He said a wonderful saying, "The healthy do not need a doctor, but the sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." He also said, "This son of mine was dead. For I (Christ) came not only for the sake of the sick, but also to raise from the dead." So thank God, beloved, Christ has His door open, His arms open, and His bosom open to sinners. No matter how much you lost, and no matter how much you floundered in the mud, even if you spent everything you had, Christ is amazing and compensates you for everything that has happened; compensates you for years of sin.

So when he spent everything

What did the son spend? The son spent all the blessings he had; they were not his own, but rather, they are gifts from his father. All that you possess, my dear, are blessings from our Lord. We were born owning nothing, so the things the son took are originally his father's property, and he does not own any of it. The father even said to the second son, "My son, everything that is mine is yours." For example, if we lose the gift of love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we do not lose anything we possess, but we lose one of the Father's gifts. What I lose is not mine in the first place; such precious spiritual gifts the Father gave me, and people do not appreciate them.

If I fall, I will rise

How do I repent? Get up...move; you are unbound. A person thinks idle habits and accumulating sins are bonds, but Christ loosens the bonds, so do not be afraid. You say, 'I've become used to this for many years; and for me it became an addiction.' We may find, for example, that someone who starts smoking cigarettes would say after ten years, 'It's in my blood.' Sin—the passing of days and years—appears as if it is in a person's blood. If a person starts stealing and repeats it tens and hundreds of times, it will become second nature. No; it is

not your nature; the long years you live in sin away from God are not your nature, but rather alienation.

Get up and stop sinning; move your feet from the place of sin. The fathers said, "Whoever takes a step towards God will find God takes a hundred steps toward him." So, if with determination and strength you say, 'Lord Jesus, save me,' and move one step, God will take a hundred steps toward you. The proof is the son did not reach his father's house. Christ said, "So he had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." When his father saw him from afar, he had compassion on him and ran towards him and wept over him. "Weeping for the dead lasts for seven days, and mourning for the fool and the hypocrite lasts all the days of his life." Weeping for the sinful person is weeping for all time that does not end, because the loss of a person who lives a life of sin is a great loss, because he loses his eternal life.

There is healing in the bosom of Christ

He fell on his neck, kissed him, healed him, and took him in his arms; where is the sin now? It became powerless. The bonds of sin, my beloved, have become an illusion. If a person throws himself into the bosom of Christ, sin will never have power over him. You remember when they took Lazarus out of the grave, He said, "Loose him." The bonds of sin have been loosened. Usually, a person thinks he is burdened by sin and it has become his way of life. He will live and die with this burden. No... This is an illusion from a very devious devil. Say, "I will rise and go to my father." There is no power in the world that keeps me from my Father.

The son had decided to say, "I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am not worthy to be called your son." But when his father met him and embraced him, he said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you," and wanted to go on to say, "I am not worthy to be your son, make me a slave." His father interrupted him, as if he was telling him, "Don't say that... I am your father." Until now, you do not know the heart of the Father. You say, 'Our Father who art in heaven,' a million times in your life, but until this moment you do not know Him and do not know His merciful heart toward sinners and His tender love for them.

So he got up and came to his father

It is a very great loss for a person to acclimatise himself to the life of sin, and get used to it and live by it. Get up and move and throw yourself at His feet. Tell Him, 'I am a sinner; I have sinned in heaven and before you, and I am not worthy to be a Christian. I do not deserve to pray the Our Father. Make me a servant; remove from me the high rank of sonship that is for the children of God and make me Your servant.' So you will hear this great voice ringing inside your heart saying to you, 'You are my son, and as long as I am your Father; no sin can overpower you—neither idle habits nor idle talk. You have been granted the authority of the sons of God to trample on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. This is your authority: that sin should not prevail over you, but that you should trample it with your feet with the authority of the children of God.' Glory be to God forever, Amen."