



THE VOICE OF SAINT MARK

Podcast of the Coptic Orthodox Tradition

Parish of Saint John the Theologian – Dijon

Episode:

The Prodigal Son

Gospel of Luke 15:11–32 | 3rd Sunday of Great Lent

Coptic Orthodox Tradition

Episode Presentation

Welcome to The Voice of Saint Mark.

Today, the Gospel sets before us one of the most profoundly moving parables Jesus ever told. A son who departs, squanders everything, and touches the very depths. And a father who runs out to meet him.

Perhaps nowhere else in the Gospel does Scripture reveal with such beauty what repentance and the mercy of God truly mean.

In this season of Lent, let us allow this parable to reach us where we are. *Because it speaks of all of humanity — and of that return which is always possible.*

Let us now hear the Holy Gospel:

Gospel of Luke 15:11–32

11 A man had two sons.

12 The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” And he divided his property between them.

13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs 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 more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!”

18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”

20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

21 And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”

22 But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.

23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.

24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate.

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 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

27 And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.”

28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.

29 But he answered his father, “Look, these many years I have been serving you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

31 And he said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

Homily

✠ *In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.* ✠

Perhaps nowhere in the Gospel does Scripture reveal more clearly and beautifully the essential meaning of repentance and the great mercy of God, who always rejoices at finding the one who was lost. This is the perfect illustration of the meaning of Lent.

In the figure of the Prodigal Son who returns from his sin to go back to his father’s house, and in that of the father who goes out to meet him, embraces him with love, and restores him to his dignity within the paternal home, the tradition of the Church has recognised, on the one hand, fallen humanity returning to God, and on the other, God preparing for it a mystical banquet in heaven. The liturgical tradition tells us: *“He slaughters the fattened calf so that we may share in his joy — the joy of the Father who gives out of love, and the joy of the Lamb, Christ the Saviour of our souls, who immolates himself for us.”* In the Gospels, the image of the banquet is always a figure of the Kingdom of God, of the heavenly Kingdom. And the slaughtered fattened calf, recalling the slain lamb of the Book of Revelation, is none other than Christ crucified and risen — *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* It is this same Lamb we shall sing at Easter: *“Like a year-old lamb, Christ, of his own will, immolated himself for all — O our purifying Pascha.”* And it is of him that the famous Easter homily of Saint John Chrysostom speaks, when it proclaims that *“the fattened calf is served.”*

Thus the image of the embrace between the Father and the Prodigal Son is an icon — indeed, the icon — of repentance and forgiveness, and it is the central element of this parable.

The share of the inheritance that the Prodigal Son squandered through his way of life and misconduct is seen as the grace of God which we have wasted in sin. Because he recklessly spent his portion of the inheritance, the Prodigal Son became a slave among strangers; and the distant country to which he had exiled himself is interpreted as the land of corruption — the condition in which humanity found itself after its exile from Paradise.

In that distant land, he worked tending pigs and had nothing to eat — not even the pods the pigs were eating. This is to say: man has become a slave, the slave of the passions, on account of sin. (The carob pods represent the food of unclean animals, the pigs — that which feeds impurity.) There he experiences hunger, that is, the trials which are the lot of every man estranged from God, but which grace also uses to make possible the return.

The Departure: A free will turned away from God — the squandering of grace, exile in the land of the passions, and spiritual destitution.

The Return: “He came to himself” — awareness of one’s fallen state, true contrition, the decision to arise and set out. This is metanoia: a radical change of direction in one’s way of living.

The Welcome: The Father’s embrace — the joy of God at finding what was lost, the restoration of dignity, and the heavenly banquet as a figure of the Kingdom.

So we sinners are invited to set out on this pilgrimage toward the Promised Land which is the Kingdom of God. This is possible only through true repentance, which is a conversion — a change of course, a turning around in our manner of living.

I suddenly realise that God has lavished upon me marvellous riches: first of all, life itself, and the possibility of giving it meaning in love. He has further given me new and eternal life in his Son, and he has given me his eternal Kingdom — joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. I have received the knowledge of God, and in that knowledge, the capacity to be a free and loving son. Yet all of this I have lost; I have renounced it through my sins and through this departure for a distant land, far from God, in exile and in slavery to the passions.

But now, the Prodigal Son has remembered. He has remembered his father’s house, the lost joy — and so he arose and returned to his father, who received him with open arms and forgave him. *I will arise and go.* How simple these words are, and yet how difficult. And yet my whole life depends on them.

Everything depends on my decision: on an authentic repentance, on an awareness of my inner darkness on the one hand, and on the other, on this illumination of the heart and soul by the light of divine love — a love capable at every instant of filling and illuminating my darkness and my fallen life.

No one can truly say that he repents, that he regrets his sins and evil deeds, without radically changing his way of living and acting. Without genuine conversion, there is no repentance. Only true conversion — metanoia — leads us to salvation.

Thus the parable of the Prodigal Son offers us a teaching of capital spiritual importance for our edification and our conversion. It gives us, in the form of a narrative, a teaching we must put into practice not only during the season of Lent, but throughout our entire life.

✠ *To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.* ✠