
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. II

Sunday of the Prodigal Son



“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion...”

– Psalm 136 (137), v.1

On the 2nd Sunday of the pre-Lenten period, we remember the Parable of the Prodigal (wasteful) Son (Lk 15:11-32), which is an exact image of repentance: the exile of sin, the ‘rising up’ to make a return, the resolve to serve the Father, and the final joyous arrival at our rightful home.

The idea that **sin is exile** is repeated in the psalm *“By the rivers of Babylon”* (Ps 136). Superficially, the psalm is the lament of the Israelites after they were defeated and taken from Jerusalem into slavery by the Babylonian pagans (II Kings 24:12-16). The Church, however, transforms Psalm 136 by appointing it to be sung sorrowfully at matins on this and the next two Sundays. Now, we are in captivity (to our sins), in a ‘strange land’ (this world), longing for our rightful home (Heaven).

But do we long to return from exile? We too often live like the prodigal did in his exile: wasting the lives God gave us on worldly pursuits and completely forgetting our spiritual home & origin. In turn, we end up as a virtual slave in this foreign land, driven by need to live in a metaphorical pig-sty. And, if we were to *“forget, thee, O Jerusalem”* (Ps 136:5), we would stay in this state – not knowing that there is more to our life than the strange land we find ourselves in. Therefore, we must acknowledge our current state first of all and, naturally, lament it. In today’s parable, the

prodigal “came to his senses” in this way, yet still he remained in a pig-sty. To complete his repentance, he also **had to act** – to get up; to leave the foreign land behind; to set out for home.

Without exaggeration it can be said that we spiritually ‘leave the Father’s house’ hundreds of times a day to squander our inheritance. But we must not give up, for as long as **we come to our senses, get up, and set out** “...*the loving Father...receives His prodigal sons returning from a far country and opens the doors of His house and clothes them in the best robe, and gives them each a ring on their hand and shoes on their feet and commands all the saints to rejoice in them.*” (St Tikhon of Zadonsk)

Lent is an image of the prodigal’s return home. Let us together set out on this journey, which ends in the embrace of the Father and the joyous feasting and celebration of Pascha.

More about the Great Fast

Previously, we explored the history of Lent, the Great Fast, and why we fast in the period before Holy Pascha. Now, we will look into more detail of what Christians do during Lent.

Great care needs to be taken in approaching this long period of abstinence so that it can be our ‘springtime’ of spiritual growth and not a cause of irritability, depression or worst of all: pride.

So, the ‘rules’: the fast of Lent means abstinence from meat, fish, dairy, eggs. Except at weekends, we also abstain from olive oil and ‘wine’ (i.e. alcohol); generally we should also eat less often. We don’t need to worry about what someone is ‘giving up for Lent’ because we are all giving up the same things. The fast is often lessened for the elderly, ill, pregnant or young mothers and people with infirmities. Talking to our priest or spiritual father a person can decide how to fast in a way that leads to spiritual growth. As a saying from the monasteries goes: *‘keep your eyes on your own plate and not that of your brother’*. How we fast in Lent is a private matter.

Always remember, **the main aim of fasting is to remind us of our dependency on God**. We will feel hungry. We will feel discomfort in the beginning. This is not done so God rewards us but so that we realize our mortality and that without God we cannot do anything. This realization leads us to ask God for help – to pray. Fasting without prayer is just a diet and so both are needed to have a fruitful Lent. So as we reduce what we eat during Lent we must also increase our prayer. Reading the Bible aids us in this. Normally there is a Gospel and Epistle

reading set for every weekday – two daily readings. In Lent, there are three: all of them from books of the Old Testament and covering important themes:

The Book of Genesis: describes the fall of man and his expulsion from paradise, and how fallen the world became. Later the readings cover the story of Joseph, who like Christ was ‘innocent’ in his sufferings.

The Prophet Isaiah: begins with a call for fasting and repentance before going on to promise Christ, Whose Resurrection we celebrate at Pascha.

The Book of Proverbs: gives us ethical instruction and reminds us that Lent is not just a time for ‘feelings’ or emotions of repentance, but practical moral effort.

As well as prayer and fasting, charity should also be increased during Lent. In the 2nd century writing *Shepherd of Hermas* we are taught that the money saved by eating less during Lent should be spent on the poor. Your parish may have a food-bank collection during Lent – take part in this or give directly to a local food-bank. Charity can also include giving time for someone in need or who is lonely. Making sure that no part of the ‘trinity’ of fasting, prayer and charity is neglected is the best way to ensure our Great Fast is profitable.

Finally, we must remember that Lent is a time for *joy* and not gloom. This is emphasized many, many times in the hymns of Lent. This is because, as St John Chrysostom said: “*Shame comes after sin, but **boldness and joy** comes after repentance.*” Repentance is the aim of the Great Fast. Yes, our actions and weaknesses may make us sad, but when it leads to a change in our life and a better relationship with God, how can we be sad?

All mortal life is but one day, so it is said, to those who labour with love.

There are forty days in the Fast: Let us keep them all with joy.

(Matins on the first Monday of Lent)

So remember: the fast is there to help you; do not neglect prayer and charity; and be joyful!

The springtime of the Fast has dawned,

The flower of repentance has begun to open.

O brothers and sisters, let us cleanse ourselves from all impurity

And sing to the Giver of Light:

Glory be to Thee, who alone loves mankind.

The Eight Deadly Passions – Anger

St. Nikolai Velimirovich likened humanity today as sheep being driven to slaughter. Pressed together we tread on and barge into each other and in anger we turn and bite our fellow sheep, together forgetting that we are all heading for death! Instead of fighting against this awful fate – which we all share – we instead concentrate on ‘small trespasses’ against each other. Our fight should be against our fall: ‘be angry and sin not’ (Eph 4:26); just as Jesus in sinless anger drove out the money-lenders in the Temple, we should drive out the sins in ourselves, the temple of God. Anger turns into a passion, or sickness of the soul, when it is misdirected or disproportionate. An athlete needs aggression to outrun his opponents and score a goal, but if the ‘red-mist’ descends then he will shoot wildly and ‘miss the target’ – the literal meaning of sin.



Signs of anger: irritability, remembering past wrongs and offences, harboring thoughts of revenge, wishing evil upon others. Leads to outbursts, arguments, judging others (‘rightly’ or wrongly), slander, hurtful words, cruelty, physical violence and even murder.

How to combat anger: the chief virtue that combats this vice is **meekness**. If we see our own faults, bear physical illness or discomfort with patience, and recognize that we all suffer from sin, then it becomes difficult to have anger against others. We can more easily forgive others when we see in them an illness that we also suffer from and want to be healed of. Just as we would help someone suffering from cancer despite them being irritable, let us ‘love those who hate us’, bearing in mind their illness. Remember the words of St Ambrose of Optina: ‘Kindness ...to your neighbours, and forgiveness of their shortcomings, **is the shortest path to salvation**’.

A good way of obtaining meekness is to pray the Jesus Prayer: ‘*O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on **me a sinner***’, with emphasis on ‘a sinner’. Before any act or conversation, say a short prayer like this and it can help to lessen anger, which is impulsive and cannot survive patience. Anger can flare up very quickly, so practice praying like this at all times, not only when we feel anger is close. This way meekness becomes a habit which covers the fiery habit of anger and, in time and with patience, extinguishes it.