

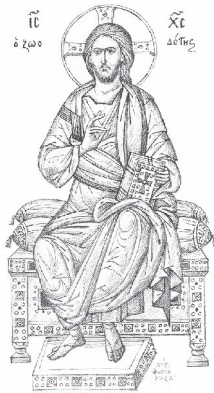
February 2007



The Orthodox parish of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross, Lancaster

Meeting at the Chaplaincy Centre of Lancaster University

Newsletter



Ἐπιφανία Χριστοῦ Παντοκράτορος.
(Ἁγ. Κωνσταντῖνος, 1962)

The parish of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross,
belongs to the Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of the United Kingdom and Ireland,
which is part of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of Western and Central Europe.
Our Metropolitan is His Eminence Archbishop Gabriel.
The Patriarchate of Antioch is third senior of the Orthodox Churches.
The Patriarch is His Beatitude Ignatius IV.

*The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch
(Acts 11:26)*

LOST AND FOUND

A sermon preached by
Fr. Michael Harper
in St. Botolph's Church, Bishopsgate,
February 19th 2007
(Luke 15:11-32)

Introduction

The parable of the prodigal son is the best known of all Christ's parables. It is very different, for example, from the parable of the unjust steward that follows it (in chapter 16), which reflects Middle Eastern business life, and which is very hard for westerners to understand. But the parable of the prodigal son, although as we shall see it has eastern nuances, is about family life, and so much easier to understand and appreciate. It has been called "the Evangelium in Evangelio" and so it is – the "gospel within the gospel".

Kenneth Bailey in his book *Through Peasant Eyes*, writes of this parable, "nearly everyone has a sense of awe at its inexhaustible contents".

This parable is not an allegory, for the father is not "God incognito". Yet the father in this story is a profound symbol of God the Father.

In some ways the parable has been misnamed; it should perhaps be called the parable of the elder son. Surely the punch line of the story comes at the end with the conversation between the father and his elder son. We are also told about the audience which was composed of a mixture of tax collectors, sinners and Pharisees. The Pharisees were

disputing about Christ sitting at table with those they regarded as the riff-raff of society. Their attitude matched that of the elder brother when his brother returned.

The parable is a superb introduction to Lent, because the centre point of it concerns repentance. It is to challenge, so to speak, our preference for the equivalent of feeding on pig's swill rather than to dine at our father's table. Lent should be for us a change of direction. It is a return to the Father who has been waiting patiently for us to come.

The Love of the Father

Nearly sixty years ago I made an important discovery about this parable. I found that whenever I read it, or heard a sermon on it, there was always something new to learn. I have to admit that when I started preparing for this, I wondered, "Does the magic still work?" Well, I am glad to say the answer was "yes".

I want us to see two aspects of the Father's love, and it is the first that came fresh to me. For we see this love in the father's response to the demand of his son to share the inheritance with him.

Kenneth Bailey describes this as "unbelievable love". He has lived much of his life in the Middle East and North Africa. In his book he describes a period of fifteen years during which he travelled from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan, asking villagers the same question, "do you know of anyone who has asked his father for the inheritance while the father is

still alive." Here is the conversation which was repeated over and over again:

"Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?"

"Never"

"Could anyone ever make such a request?"

"Impossible!"

"If anyone ever did, what would happen?"

"His father would beat him, of course!"

"Why?"

"This request means – he wants his father to die!"

L. Levison writing about this says, "There is no law or custom among the Jews or Arabs which entitles the son to a share of the father's wealth while the father is still alive".

To sum up, Kenneth Bailey writes, "It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic illustration of the quality of love than this".

An Arab, Ibrahim Said, who has written a commentary on this Gospel, has written about this, "this action is unique, something which has not been done by any father in the past".

The second aspect of the love of the Father which I want us to look at is the demonstration of it when his son returns. The father is said to be

"filled with compassion". The Greek word (splachna) literally refers to the bowels – the very centre of our being. Hence the way the word "guts" is used in English. This love is not primarily mental or emotional, but comes from the father's total being.

We also read that the father RAN to meet his son. There may well have been a practical reason for this – the desire to be there before the villagers, who might have given the prodigal short shrift. But Kenneth Bailey states clearly that "an oriental nobleman in flowing robes never runs anywhere." In the East it is regarded as humiliating. The Greek philosopher Aristotle once wrote, "Great men never run in public". But the father did – as a demonstration of the intensity of his love for his son.

But more evidence of that love and acceptance follows:

The kiss of reconciliation

The Greek word means to kiss "again and again". It was not a ceremonial peck, but an outpouring of affection. In eastern villages to this day the kiss was the traditional sign of the end of a dispute.

The best robe

No doubt this was his father's own robe, and so demonstrated his father's full acceptance of him.

The ring, which meant "you are trusted"

The shoes, which signified that he was a freeman, not a slave

The fatted calf, which showed that the whole village community

was involved, not just the close family. In the early church confession was normally made to the community not privately to a priest. So here the reconciliation of the father and son is seen not merely as a private and individual matter; everyone in the neighbourhood was also involved.

There is a story told about another "prodigal" who left his home and led a dissolute life, which was a disgrace to his parents. He too decided to go home, but he was uncertain what the response would be. So he wrote to his parents to tell them what he was intending to do. And he asked them to put a small white handkerchief in the top left corner of a window as a sign that he would be accepted back. As he drew near to his home he looked carefully for the handkerchief. It was not there – but in its place was a huge white sheet; the message was plain, you are welcome home and all is forgiven.

So it is with God's love for us. Yes, God does part with the inheritance if that is what we want; but when we come home the response is overwhelming – there is no period of probation, no regime of penances, and no tagging. Total acceptance – no questions asked.

In the Orthodox service of Matins for the Sunday of the Prodigal Son we read: "God restores all the signs of glory".

The Repentance of the prodigal

We see this in two main steps. First of all we are told that:

"He came to himself".

This is not repentance, and the normal Greek word for repentance – metanoia is not used. In the Syriac version we read "he came to his nefesh", which is certainly not the word for repentance. The words "he came to his senses", although not accurately translating the Syriac, is probably as close as we can get in English to what is being said.

It would seem important as we approach Lent that we realise our need to be arrested by it, and to realise fully the seriousness of our condition. The prodigal began to change when he realised where he was and how he needed to go home.

Then we are told that he rehearsed what he was going to say to his father:

"I have sinned against heaven and before you".

We notice again the connection between God (heaven) and the community, symbolised by his father. Both are to be joined together.

Our sins against God are also sins against the community.

The response of the elder brother

The German theologian Helmut Thielicke has written a book called *The Waiting Father*. In it he makes an interesting suggestion. What would have happened if the prodigal had met his elder brother before he met his father. He might well have gone back to the far country.

Ibrahim Said writes, "The elder brother has been living in the house with the spirit of a slave, not with the familiarity of a son". How often it must be that people never get to meet God because they meet elder brothers. Some years ago I was travelling on a Lebanese airliner and talking with one of the stewards. I asked him the question "are you a Muslim or a Christian?" His reply was "neither, I've had to live through the Civil War."

St. Paul writes that "because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying 'Abba! Father! So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child, then also an heir through God" (Gal 4:6-7).

The elder brother, although he was living at home, had the spirit of a slave; on the other hand his brother was ready to be a slave in his father's house, but was treated by his father as a son.

Let us allow the Holy Spirit to give us that Spirit of Sonship, which will bring us from the far country to the Father's love and presence.

ADDRESS AT EVENSONG
WESTMINISTER ABBEY
Date: 31st Jan. 2007, 07:25pm

In the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, and the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox for Theological Dialogue

Your All-Holiness, Your Eminences, dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We have always had an instinct that at root, despite many superficial differences, our understandings of the Church of God have grown on the same soil. We have looked to the definitive moments of doctrinal history, in the early centuries of the Church, for our standards of faith and worship, recognising that the creeds and definitions of the Councils lay out for us a field large enough for the freedom of mind and spirit to flourish in the way God intends. We have striven to remain focused on these great central themes – of the revelation of the Threefold Godhead, and the inseparable yet distinct life of divinity and humanity in the one Person of the Eternal Son, in communion with whom through the Spirit we pray, act and love in the life of the Church.

The Commission reflects many dimensions of our indebtedness to the Orthodox theological perspective; and you, Your All-Holiness, have yourself been a powerful spokesman in East and West for many of the themes that come into focus here. You have taught us, as no other global church leader has, the imperative significance of a moral and spiritual understanding of our material environment as the natural outworking of our faith and participation in the communion of the divine persons. You have witnessed to the difficult task of holding diverse Christian communities together in charity and right

doctrine without the sanctions of centralized control. And in this connection we are all sharply aware of how your leadership and witness is exercised in local circumstances of real difficulty and constraint. We wish to assure you of our strong support for you and your fellow - Christians in Istanbul and our continuing gratitude for your courage and clarity as a voice in the Orthodox world and in the Christian world in general.

So it is with the warmest sentiments that we greet you on this historic occasion, as a welcome guest in Great Britain, a welcome guest of the Church of England, and a welcome guest in Lambeth Palace. We have seen, through the work of our Commission, a great harvest of God's goodness to us all; and we pray that on these foundations we may continue to labour for that lasting and visible reconciliation between Christian believers that is Our Lord's will, and to labour together to show Christ to the world

-Christ who, to take the words of the Epiphany kontakion, has come, who is manifest, who is the Light Inaccessible.

+ Rowan Cantuar,
Lambeth Palace

MAJOR CELEBRATIONS THIS MONTH

2nd Feb: **The meeting of our Lord in the Temple**

3rd Feb: **St. Simeon the God-Receiver**

8th Feb: **The Holy Great Martyr Theodore Stratelates**

10th Feb: **The priestly-martyr Charalampus**

23rd Feb: **The Holy Priestly-Martyr Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna**

24th Feb: **The finding of the head of St. John the Baptist**

For the lives of Saints please visit the Prologue of Ohrid:

www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/prolog.htm



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