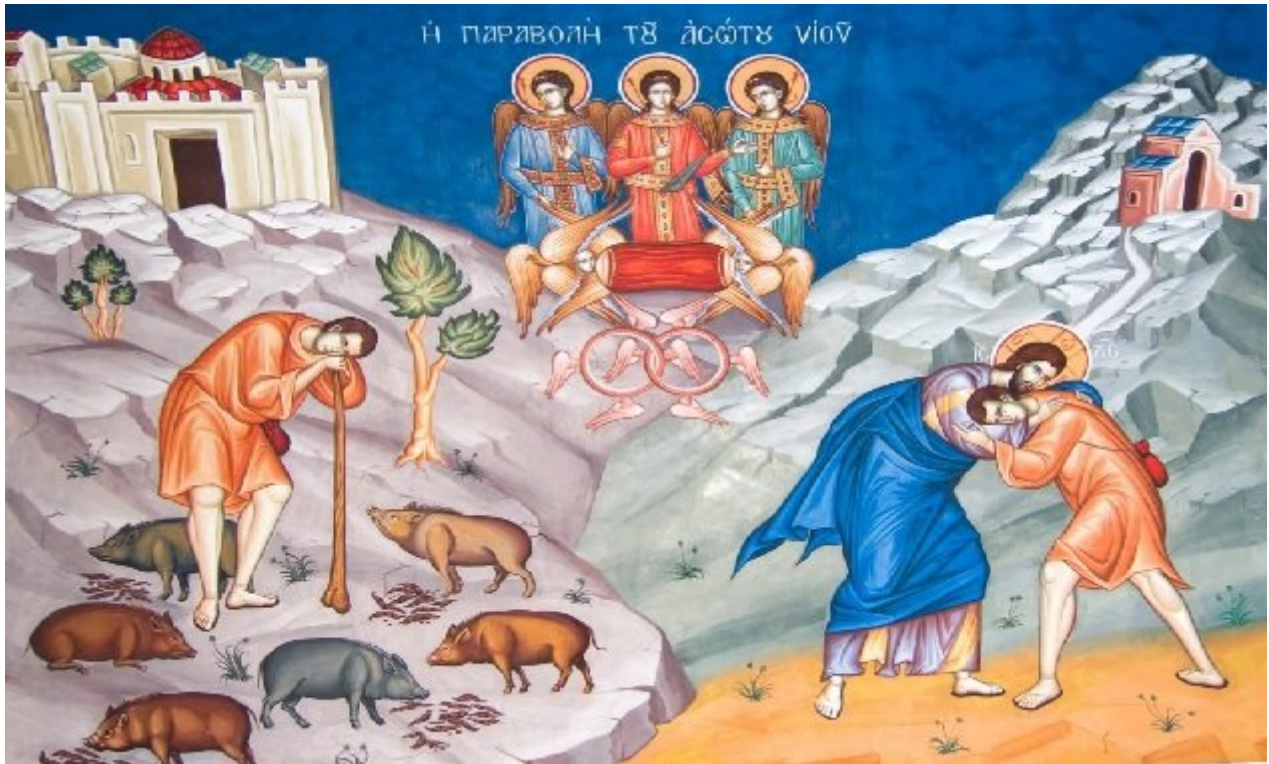


Sermon on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son [Part I] (Georgios Patronos, Emeritus Professor of Theology, University of Athens)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Introduction

The parable of the Prodigal Son, which is the Gospel reading for today, is, as is well-known, one of the most beautiful texts of world literature.



It also recalls for us the Classical narrative, from Greek mythology, of the adventure of Odysseus who left Ithaca in order to become a man and wiser than before. This is to do with the eternal quest which people undertake, within time and history, leaving everything- certainty and security- to seek the unobtainable, the dream, and, in the end, made wiser by this experience of life, to return to their home and roots, where they eventually find rest.

This eternal myth was expressed so clearly and realistically by the two great traditions of the Mediterranean; by the poetic inspiration of Greek wisdom and the revelatory stylus of Jewish reflection. I think it's worth paying particular attention to the iconographical tradition of the prodigal son, to see how this productive adventure unfolds before us: in the beginning it seems negative, but in the end it appears to be inevitable and necessary, so that people, in their existential restlessness shouldn't be lost, but achieve, in the end, their desired spiritual coming-of-age and maturation.

1. The eternal desire of young people to leave the nest and grow up

It appears at the beginning that the parable of the Prodigal Son focuses attention on the negative results of the revolt and flight of the younger son from his father's guardianship. The younger son of the family feels suffocated on the land of his fathers, seems to be bothered by the presence of his father and elder brother and to want to be set free from everything that binds him to his father's house and makes him feel that he's the youngest and that he's forever being told to do as

he's bidden.

It's indicative here that there's no mention of a mother or a sister. In Jewish tradition, women are almost always absent or silent. Women never stand up for themselves. They never leave. The woman is the root, the tradition, the earth which is fertilized and nourishes life. No son ever revolts against his mother and cuts himself off from his native soil. He always returns. It nourishes him. The same is true of Odysseus in Greek mythology. Ithaca remains the dream for him, the vision of his life; he will return there, be saved and come into his rest, now a mature man.

The younger son of the parable took with him his share of his inheritance in order to get to know other peoples and new worlds. His original aim was quite proper. Escape often has a positive perspective. But then, "in a far country, he wasted his substance on riotous living". That's the surprise and yet also what you'd expect. At the start, the young man sees everything positively. The negative catches him off guard and there are times when it gets him down. This is precisely where his life is at risk: it depends on his will and strength to react positively, to come to himself and take the right decisions.

Through this process and chain of events, of departure, adventure, knowledge of life, weaning and maturation, people reach the end, so long as the end is the family home in their own particular Ithaca. In any case, the spiritual life is nothing more than a continuing spiritual adventure.

Young people always leave. Adventure's in their blood. They want to depart from what they already know and understand in search of new worlds and fresh experiences. It's inconceivable and unnatural for them not to try to doubt the past, to distance themselves from the tradition of earlier generations unquestioningly, not to seek to build their own world. Of course, this effort necessarily entails spending their parents' wealth. That's the norm. There's never a case when young people aren't called rebellious, when they don't surprise us with their decisions, don't pain us with their farewells and departures. History's always been made in this way, with positive and negative judgments, with the submission and discipline of the elder son and the rebellion and "prodigality" of the younger. Just so long as Ithaca stays on the horizon.

2. The Problematic Attitude of the Elder Son

On the other hand, we have the behaviour of the elder son. In the parable, he's presented as a self-contained person who vaunts his superiority over his younger

brother, overstates his loyalty and his conscientiousness in his family duties. His aim is to belittle the attitude and position of his younger brother and claim a generous legacy, as a reward for his actions and virtues. This image is almost always the same and repeated in every detail.

It's always the eldest who are best and they're the ones who're always right. Here, the elder son represents the person who's assiduously religious, disciplined and righteous, who feels that his or her own life is justified by the behaviour of people like the prodigal in the parable. It almost seems as if the elder son is actually hoping for the perdition of the younger. For him, virtue acquires value because of the existence of evil. And this is why the attitude that such people have is often the very reason why younger ones feel driven to take to the road and to adventures of prodigality.

This is the reason behind his displeasure at the return of the prodigal. He's not glad that his lost brother has come back, he doesn't acclaim his repentance, because he never expected it and never hoped for it. And now that the younger one's back, he conspicuously plays no part in the joy and expressions of the family reunion. Now, at this most crucial time, he's the one who's absent and the prodigal is present.

This attitude reminds us of the negative stance of the Pharisee in last week's Gospel reading, the pious, "perfect" man who attempted to demean the sinful Publican with all the social and religious means at his disposal. But just as the Publican was, in the end, justified by God, so too the prodigal son is justified by his father.

It appears that the elder son, with his attitude and behaviour, with his strange, demanding role, actually more or less forced the younger one to leave their home, with the aim of making their father's enormous wealth his own, exclusive inheritance. Evil always has a cause. Nobody's born prodigal. They become prodigal through what life brings them.

[To be continued]