

On the Prodigal Son

THIS SUPPLICATION, TOO, BY SAINT ROMANOS

translated by Archimandrite Ephrem Lash

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As the second prelude indicates, in this account of the parable the main theme is the Eucharist, the heavenly banquet. There is also a baptismal theme, specifically in stanzas 4-6, after which the theme of the Eucharist is taken up. St Romanos stresses that the “Master and Lord of the ages” is also the loving Father who makes the return of the ne’er-do-well the occasion for a great feast. St Romanos goes further than the Gospel and suggests that the strength of that love even prevails over the fury of the disgruntled elder son.

Only one manuscript gives a time for the kontakion and this is for the second Sunday in Lent. However, in the current Church Year, the parable is associated with the Sunday before the start of Carnival.

The biblical reference is Luke 15.11-32:

“11 And Jesus 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. And he divided unto them his living. 13 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. 14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15 And 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 fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine ate: and no man gave to him. 17 And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s 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 am no more worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired servants. 20 And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet 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 more worthy to be called your son. 22 But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: 23 And bring here the fatted calf, 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 elder 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 is come; and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound. 28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore his father came out, and entreated him. 29 And he answering said to his father, Lo,

these many years do I serve you, neither transgressed I at any time your commandment: and yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: 30 But as soon as this your son came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you have killed for him the fatted calf. 31 And he said to him, Son, you are ever with me, and all that I have is yours. 32 It was proper that we should make merry, and be glad: for this your brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”

Prelude 1

I have rivalled the prodigal by my senseless deeds
and like him I fall down before you and I seek forgiveness, Lord.
Therefore do not despise me,
Master and Lord of the ages.

Prelude 2

Of your mystical table,¹ O Immortal,
count me worthy, who have been corrupted by living as a prodigal.
And the first robe of grace²,
which I have befouled, wretch that I am, by the stains of the passions,
in your unattainable mercy give me once again,
Master and Lord of the ages.

1
Let us contemplate a supper magnificently spread
for the former prodigal now become temperate,
for his father, or rather the Father of all humankind,
receives him repentant, in his love for humankind.
Rejoicing at his repentance,
he says to the slaves, “Hurry, make ready for us the all-holy supper.
Hurry, above all sacrifice the calf
to which a virgin heifer³ gave birth,
because my son was lost before
and has now been found. But let us celebrate.
He was dead and has returned to life. And I have taken him to my bosom, I the
Master and Lord of the ages.

¹ The Eucharist. The Last Supper, and therefore the Eucharist, is called in Greek to mystikon deipnon, the “Mystical Supper”.

² Baptism

³ A frequent image for the Mother of God in the liturgical texts.

2

So let us now hasten and share in the supper;
if we have been counted worthy to rejoice with the Father.
Let us banquet with the King of the angels.
He provides bread which gives blessedness.
As drink, he gives holy blood,
source of life without corruption and without end, while angels stand and wait.⁴
Let us see how the first to take his place
was the Lord himself who urges us.⁵
Then at once patriarchs, choirs of apostles
and the prophets with the martyrs.
He makes his son, the prodigal, take his place next to him, the
Master and Lord of the ages.

3

What is the banquet? Let us first learn of the supper
from the Gospels, so that we too may celebrate.
I will therefore recall the parable of the Prodigal.
For he was formerly stripped bare of every grace,
having squandered all his substance,
and he runs to his father with many lamentations crying, "Father, I have sinned."
So the one who sees all things saw, hurried,
and met him and kissed him,
flung his arms round the neck of the one who had returned,
for he is the God of the repentant.
In his compassion he had mercy on his son who had fallen, he the
Master and Lord of the ages.

4

The Saviour of all, seeing his son then clothed
in filthy apparel, was filled with compassion;
and so he cried at once to the slaves who were serving,
"Quickly, give my child the first robe,"⁶

⁴ The angels are both in attendance, as at the Liturgy, and the "waiters" at the celestial feast. At the earthly Liturgy, the deacons hold the place of the angels.

⁵ Cf. Luke 14.23 where the Lord's insistence is stressed by his command to the servants, "Compel them to come in".

⁶ The robe of Baptism, which symbolises the "first robe" of Adam before the Fall.

which the baptismal font weaves for all,
which the grace of my Spirit prepares, and hasten and clothe him.
Remember how when he was clothed⁷
the enemy stripped him and made him a spectacle
for all the demons, as he attacked with envy
the King of the whole earth,⁸
for whose sake I arrayed the whole world which I had created,⁹ I the
Master and Lord of the ages.

5
“I saw him and I cannot allow myself to overlook his nakedness;
I cannot bear to see my divine image¹⁰ like this.
For the disgrace of my child is my shame;
I will consider the glory of my child my own glory.
Hurry then, my servants and ministers¹¹
to make all his limbs beautiful once again, for they are objects of my love.
For I judge it improper to see
unprovided for, or unadorned,
the one who has run to me in repentance
and been found worthy of forgiveness.
Clothe him with the robe of grace, as I have commanded, I the
Master and Lord of the ages.

6
So that my child may be an honoured monument for creation,
adorn his hand with a ring.
It is a pledge of the undivided Trinity,
to guard him since he has had recourse to it,
so that when he displays this seal
it may appear from afar that he is my son, mine, the ruler of all.
May he become well-known to his enemies
and appear most fearful to the demons

⁷ By the garment of light in Paradise, Genesis 3.7

⁸ Cf. Genesis 1.26

⁹ Cf. Genesis 2.1-15

¹⁰ Cf. Genesis 1.26

¹¹ A frequent word for angels. Cf. Psalms 102(103).21, 103(104).4

and the overweening devil,
so that he may no longer approach him.
For he will not stand his ground on seeing my seal, which I give, I the
Master and Lord of the ages.

7

Nor will I allow his feet to be unprotected.
I do not wish that they should be stripped of my care.
Quickly put shoes on the one who was stripped naked,
so that the all-wicked and crafty serpent may not find once again the heel¹² of my child
stripped naked;
nor may the all-evil one through his wickedness lay a trap for the meek one.
I give power to my son,
so that he may trample on the dragon as powerless,
may march with confidence
upon asp and basilisk¹³
and walk in Paradise which I planted, I the
Master and Lord of the ages.

8

But now, as I said, sacrifice, for the one who has stumbled,
the virgin calf, the Son of the Virgin.
He has never been tamed by the yoke of sin,
with eagerness he goes ahead of those who drag him,
for he does not revolt against the sacrifice,
but willingly bows his neck to those who hasten to sacrifice him.
Drag in, sacrifice, the Giver of life,
who is sacrificed and not put to death,
who gives life to those in hell,¹⁴
so that as we eat we may celebrate,
for he was dead, as I said before, and has come to life, the one on whom I have had mercy, I
the
Master and Lord of the ages.

¹² Cf. Genesis 3.16

¹³ Psalm 90(91).13

¹⁴ Cf. Romans 4.17

9

Now priests, my faithful servants, sacrifice this calf
and, to all who are worthy of my supper, give to eat
the spotless calf, pure in every way,
fattened from the unsown earth¹⁵ which he fashioned.¹⁶
Give to them a precious drink,
blood and water which springs from his side¹⁷ for those who believe.
Eat this then all of you always,
for though it is parted, it is not divided,
not separated, not consumed,
but to the ages satisfies all,
for he offers himself as all-holy food, the Lover of mankind,
Master and Lord of the ages.

10

As the whole company of the invited were supping
and as all were celebrating, they sang a godly hymn.
The Father, first of those present, began.
“Taste” he said “and see that I am good.”¹⁸
Then after this the psalmist,¹⁹
striking the lyre, cries with sweetest voice, “Quickly bring
sacrifices, pure, blessed
to the all-holy altar.
Bring a calf with thanksgiving.”²⁰
And after him Paul cried out,
“Our Passover has now been sacrificed, Jesus Christ,²¹
Master and Lord of the ages.”

11

The angels who were serving at the supper saw them
celebrating like this and singing with one accord,

¹⁵ That is, the Mother of God

¹⁶ Cf. Genesis 2.7

¹⁷ John 18.34

¹⁸ Psalm 33(34).9

¹⁹ King David

²⁰ Psalm 50(51).21

²¹ 1 Corinthians 5.7.

and they rivalled them and began their song of praise.

What was the hymn? Let us hear, if you will:

“Holy are you, Father, who have been well pleased²²
for the spotless calf to be now slaughtered for mankind.

Holy also is your Son,
willingly sacrificed as an unblemished calf,
and who hallows those who are baptized
by the power of the font.

Again holy is the Holy Spirit, whom he gives to those who believe, he the
Master and Lord of the ages.”²³

12

The first son knew nothing at all of these things, because
he happened to have gone to the fields.

But as he returned he hears the music,
summons a servant and asks him,

“So what is all this? Tell me at once;
for a mysterious²⁴ sound of a great festival strikes my ears.

Tell me what is this event?

The mysteries which belong to me
and all the wealth of the divine sacrifice,
who, in my absence, is sharing them with others?

Can he be bestowing once again²⁵ gifts of grace, he who begot me, the
Master and Lord of the ages?”

13

Then the servant who had been questioned said to him eagerly,
“Your young brother has arrived.

On receiving him, your Father rejoiced,
and, as he has recovered him in good health,

he has sacrificed the fatted calf
and now summoned his friends and acquaintances to the supper.”

²² Cf. Matthew 4.17, 17.5

²³ The angels sing an elaboration of the Trisagion, or Thrice Holy Hymn, “Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us”, stressing the Trinitarian understanding of the hymn.

²⁴ Mystikos, connected with the mysteries of God, especially the sacraments. What he has heard is the Trisagion: see previous note

²⁵ He did so earlier when he let the younger son take his share of the inheritance

On hearing all this, he was instantly beside himself and was not willing to take part in the supper of festivity.

Angered by what was happening

he said, "I will not go in. I will not look on what he has done, the

Master and Lord of the ages."

14

Christ teaches us, through this, an example²⁶

of his own compassion and measureless pity,

which rouses even the just to indignation.²⁷

Come then, let us learn how he stood and entreated him,

he who begot them both,

he who is Governor and Creator of all things, the God who wishes all to be saved.²⁸

Ineffable, inexpressible is your compassion

for those who are saved, Lover of mankind,

for you always heal the righteous,

while you call sinners back again.

The righteous you kept safe, while the other you saved, you the

Master and Lord of the ages.

15

Offering his right hand, the Compassionate raised the fallen son.

Likewise he supported the other who was standing.

The one who was laid low he raised up in his compassion,

while he would in no way allow the one who stood to fall.

The one in poverty he enriches;

the one in wealth he would not allow to become poor, but saved them all.

Come then, let us learn what the youth said

to his Father, and how he refused

to be present at the supper which had been prepared,

for he was angered at what was happening.

And how his Father stood imploring him, he who is

Master and Lord of the ages.

²⁶ Cf. 1 Peter 2.21

²⁷ Cf. Matthew 20.15. Here, "the just" is the elder son

²⁸ 1 Timothy 2.4

16

The indignant son spoke these words to his Father,
“For so long a time I have been slave to your will
and have always served your commandments,
and not a single commandment of yours have I transgressed at all.
You know, even if I do not say it, that what I say is true.
And, for these toils, you have not allowed me, as your child, even a kid.
I am oppressed unceasingly in desert places
and deprive myself and am tormented²⁹
by the fiercest heats and by the winters,
that I may satisfy your power.
Yet to the prodigal on his return you have given far greater honour, you the
Master and Lord of the ages.

17

“When you saw this son who has devoured
your wealth with harlots, you slaughtered the calf at once.
You should, in my opinion, have at least reproached him in words
and rebuked him and, at the same time, turned away your face.
But you instantly received him,
and you had compassion on him. First you embraced him, then decked him out in a robe.
You showed him honour with a ring.
You shod him with sandals.
You made a supper for celebration
and invited all his friends.
Such are the honours you gave the offender on his return, you the
Master and Lord of the ages.”

18

No sooner had the Father heard these words from his child
Than he answered him with meekness,
“Incline your ears and listen to your Father.³⁰
You are with me, for you have never left me.
You have not been separated from the Church.

²⁹ Cf. Hebrews 11.37

³⁰ Psalm 16(17).6

Your place is always with me, with all my angels.
But he has come covered with shame,
naked and ugly crying out, 'Have mercy.
I have sinned, Father, and I implore –
I who have offended before you –
accept me as a hired servant and nourish me, for you love mankind, you the
Master and Lord of the ages.'"

19

"Your brother cried, 'Save me, holy Father.'
What should I have done as I heard his lamentation?
How could I not have pity and save
my son as he grieved and wept?
You, the prosecutor, I appoint as judge.
Sentence me, my child, as you blame me, and become my arbitrator.
For I always rejoice in loving humankind.
How then could I become inhuman?
How should I not have mercy on the one I fashioned of old³¹
and take pity on him when he repents?
It was my entrails that begot my child on whom I have had mercy, I the
Master and Lord of the ages.'"

20

"Understand what I say, my son. All that is mine is yours,³²
and to him I wanted to grant some of my goods.
The property which you have is not any less,
for I did not take from it to give to your brother;
I provided for him from my own treasures.
Of you both, I am Creator and loving Father, Lover of mankind and compassionate.
I honour you, my child, for by choice
you have always loved me and served me,
and to him I show compassion because of his eagerness
and persistence in repentance.
You should be celebrating then with all whom I invited, I the
Master and Lord of the ages.'"

³¹ Cf. Genesis 2.7

³² These words are from both the parable and John 17.10

21

“Therefore, my son, with all those who have been invited to the supper,
celebrate and sing with all the angels,
for your brother was lost and has been found.

He was dead and, beyond expectation, has returned to life.”

When he heard these words he was persuaded
and shared the gladness with his brother. And he began to sing and say,

“All of you shout with praise,
that blessed are they whose every
sin is forgiven, and whose iniquity
has been covered and wiped away.³³

I bless you, Lover of mankind, who have saved my brother also, you the
Master and Lord of the ages.”

22

O Son and Word of God, Creator of all things,
we your unworthy servants ask and implore you:
have mercy on all who call upon you.

As you did the prodigal, spare those who have sinned.

Accept and save through compassion
those who in repentance run to you, O King, crying, “We have sinned.”

Give us tears, as you did the harlot,
and pardon for the sins we have committed.

And, as you did the publican, take pity on us all,
at the intercessions of the Mother of God.

Make us partakers of your supper, as you did the prodigal,

Master and Lord of the ages.

³³ Psalm 31(32).1