

The Prodigal Son: The Parable of Parables

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“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Chartres is the cathedral of cathedrals, and here is the parable of parables. Nothing is wanting in the other parables. All are from the lips of the Lord. As one’s taste in a certain mood might prefer Cologne or Siena to Chartres, so one might prefer to make a point with the parable of the lost sheep or the lost coin. Those last two parables, followed by the prodigal son, form a triad of responses to the Pharisaic charge: “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

And yet a testimony of sense declares the prodigal son to be “*Evangelium in Evangelio*” — “the Gospel within the Gospel.” Its deceptive simplicity will greatly frustrate anyone who thinks he could invent something like it. Try to replicate its spiritual architecture, and you will probably end up with

something more like Los Angeles than Chartres. More powerfully and completely than whole libraries of sacred theology, the prodigal son speaks to our mortal mind and heart about why God created mankind and chose to give Himself to us.

By Mosaic Law, the elder son received a double portion of the patrimony, and so the younger son in this parable was content with one-third of the estate, provided he could have it immediately. There is nothing coy about our Lord's tone: the father is God, and the sons are shades and shavings of the human soul.

The impetuous son uses his free will. This is not quite what Chesterton had in mind when he wrote, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." If the free will is worth exercising, the poverty and degradation that ensue certainly show that the younger son has "done" his freedom badly.

We are prodigies by grace and prodigals by abuse of grace. In the parable, the final degradation, really a mockery, is to feed pigs. The Levitical code does not see pigs as *Animal Farm*—clever or "Three Little Pigs"—cute. Under Jewish law, pigs are as repulsive as a contagion, and the prodigal son has to feed them, which is even more demeaning than eating them. He finally converts to moral reason when he is tempted by hunger to eat what pigs eat.

We cannot easily sense the impact this image had on the Pharisees and scribes, but before they could do more than raise their eyebrows and suck in their breath, Christ summons all the instruments of His rhetorical symphony. A moral sun shines, and the son prophesies the Catholic act of contrition: he is heartily sorry for his sins (he will confess what he has done against heaven and his father), he does penance (by making the journey home from the far country of shattered illusions), and he will amend his life (volunteering as one of his father's hired servants). When Jesus describes the father running out to meet the son with compassion and joy, you can already see the wounds in His hands and the light of the Resurrection dawning behind Him: "your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

In my confessional I have an engraving of Tiepolo's painting of this scene. The actual scene is lived out every hour of every day in the confessionals of Catholicism. The son receives a robe and a ring and a feast as tokens of status fully restored. The sacrament of Reconciliation does not just patch us up; it restores the luster of baptismal dignity.

The tragic phrase in the parable is not about the prodigal's debauchery; it is from the elder who cannot bring himself to call his brother his brother. The music and dancing of the world redeemed is to him a profane minstrel show. He speaks to his father icily of "your son." The father's reply thaws that by gently calling him *teknon* ("child"). The Risen Christ will intensify that by calling the bewildered apostles *padeia* ("little children").

Child — he tells him — this my son is your brother: "your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, learned this mercy and said of a sinner, "[Y]ou ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow."

Overmuch sorrow. It is a lovely expression we owe to the translators commissioned by King James. And it is also a cruel and haunting thing in fact. The modern age, which, like the prodigal son, wanted everything *modo* ("now"), is still scrambling out of its fatal pigsty. Overmuch sorrow pulls its victims back down. Overmuch sorrow makes it hard to go home from the faraway land of outmoded illusions. Overmuch sorrow makes the door of the confessional heavy to open, for fear that a voice inside will be as hard and cold as the shrill modern sirens that led so many to physical and moral death. But when the door is opened, there is "joy in the presence of the angels of God."