

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.

What is the history of mankind? From Scripture we read that a good and loving God creates humanity in his image but we fall away from him: we try to be, to exist, without God. This is the meaning of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: we are created as hungry beings and God offers us the entire garden to eat from the fruits. Eating was a way of blessing the God who had made us. God offers the food; we bless God and eat, which unites us to him.

Yet the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not offered to us and, in eating, Adam and Eve did not bless the Lord. Are we, my brothers and sisters in Christ, guilty of the same? Do we fail to see in all our actions the presence of our Creator and do we fail to bless him? Do we bless God in our eating, our working, our playing, our praying? Are we part of our world's problems or part of its solution?

And so, in an image drawn by Fr Thomas Hopko of blessed memory, using the language of today's Gospel reading, the whole of humanity has decided to dwell among pigs, among the unclean. Humanity decided to get itself organised: we have developed pigpen farming, pigpen government, pigpen learning. We have nurtured this, we now have pigpen art, pigpen architecture, pigpen culture, pigpen civilisation. Yet all of this is within the confines of the swine, the pigs, the unclean: all of this is in the pigpen.

This leads us, my brothers and sisters, into the history of our salvation. The Lord was able to find even in the pigpen one who had faith, Abraham, and would put his trust in God. From Abraham came Isaac, from Isaac, Jacob, and then the twelve patriarchs. Despite Israel not remaining faithful, God remained faithful to his people and from them was born the most perfect person who had been born, Mary, the blessed Theotokos. It was she who, though in the pigpen of this world, was not caught by it. She, and she alone, was able to say to the Archangel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word." And from her Christ, the new Adam, could be born – not Eve from Adam but Adam from Eve – who has made possible for us a route back to the Father's house. Christ did not come to teach us how to live in the pigpen, to create a better pigpen, but that we should follow him out of the pigpen and back to the Father's house by way of the Cross.

Our path back is only by the Cross because the Cross is the perfect example to us of love. The Cross shows us, demonstrates to us, what love is because to love is to suffer. When we love someone, and that person is hurt – as all persons are hurt in this fallen world – then we suffer with him. When a mother sees her child in pain she would will to take all that pain, and more, upon herself so that her child would be healed: how much more does a God who is love suffer on behalf of all his creatures who bear his image! This is why our Church, in her great love for us, places the Cross at the very centre of the Christian life: only through the Cross can we return to the Father's house.

We turn to today's parable. We, each of us, are the Prodigal. We have been given our inheritance freely and without delay from God and we have squandered it. I have run away from the Father's house and have made my home in a foreign land among unclean animals. Yet God

does not see this as the end of my story. "But when he came to himself," we hear in today's Gospel, "when he was in his right mind." I, too, can come to my senses and rise and return to the Father's house; I, too, can take up my cross and follow Christ.

Do you, my brothers and sisters, listen when you come back to your senses or do you distract yourself until the moment passes? Do I? Our homes are filled with technologies designed to distract us from reality, do we allow time when we do not let them?

The Prodigal comes to recognise his place: he knows he has forfeited his Sonship yet he also knows of his Father's mercy, "treat me as one of your hired servants," he reasons to himself. I, too, can see myself as the first of sinners, as we pray in the Prayer before Communion. I can recognise in myself my sinful state but recognise too that our God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy ... for as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward those who fear him." The Father comes to meet the Prodigal, "But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." The Father not only accepts him back but was looking out for his return and ran towards him, an undignified action for a man with property. He desires the son's return, and the Father desires the return of each of us. When we come to our senses, when we realise we are living in a pigpen, when we leave the pigpen by the way of the Cross, the Lord will come out to meet us, each one of us, and help us back to his house.

Make time in your lives, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, to allow the realisation of the iniquity of our world come into your senses, to your right mind, and turn to the Lord. This is a constant battle: how often in our lives do we find ourselves unexpectedly back with the pigs again. But the mark of the Christian is not if he falls down but that he struggles up again afterward. It is our struggling up, rising again and again, to take up our cross which the Lord will recognise on the last day.

Yet there is another in this parable whom often we seemingly want to emulate: the older brother. God has left within everyone a memory of him. Each person in our society can come to know, in moments of silence, that the world we live in – the pigpen – is not how reality should be. Here, in our pigpen society, some are hungry, some are naked, some are sick, some are fighting, some are oppressed, some are suffering: these are not eternal realities. When we meet a person like this, who perhaps even makes the effort to enter this Church building, do we rejoice at his coming or do we complain that he is not like us? The older brother behaved like a petulant child, "But he was angry and refused to go in," and we too can often be sulking, stamping our feet because the Church invites all to meet and encounter Christ. If we are being the older brother we must quickly repent for it is a path which leads away from God. The Father meets him in the field, but at that great and final day, the Day of Judgement, we do not want to find ourselves outside the banquet.

Come to your senses! See that you are now sat in the sty and must rise up, take up your cross, and follow Christ to the Father's house. The Lord will meet you on the way and will embrace your struggle, your love, and invite you in to the Banquet of the Kingdom. Encourage each other, bring as many as you can with you: our Father's house has much room for all to feast with him.

That we may come to meet, through Christ, the Father by the power and operation of the Holy Spirit. Amen.