



# Prophet Elias News

**News in the time of self – isolation for the Orthodox Church  
of the Holy Prophet Elias in Devon  
28th February 2021**



## **Sunday of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32)**

How simple are the words in which the Gospel describes the Prodigal's cruel rejection of his father, as he prepares his departure into the far country! "Father - give me my part of thy inheritance!" Do these words not mean: "Father - I can't wait until your death! You are still strong, and I am young; it is now that I want to reap the fruits of your life, of your labours. Let us come to an agreement: For me you are dead; give me what would belong to me after your actual death, and I will go, and I will live the life I have chosen".

Isn't this very much the way we treat God and His gifts? From Him we are in possession of all things; but we feel constrained by His presence, we feel limited by the inevitable rules of His household. He expects from us integrity and truth; He expects from us that we learn from Him what it means to love with all one's mind, all one's heart, all one's strength, all one's being - and that is too much for us. We take all His gifts and we turn away from Him, to use these gifts so that they can profit us, and us alone, without any returns either to God, or to anyone else. Isn't it an image of our own behaviour?

And then, the young man leaves for an alien country, a country which is not God's own, a country which has rejected God, a country where there is no place for Him. And he lives according to the rules of this country and to the desires of his heart. And then, hunger comes. And he decides to return, even if only as a hired servant.

Now, we too turn away, carrying with us the gifts of God; and we live in a country which is also alien; we live in a world which is man-made, or rather: made by God, and distorted by man. What kind of hunger comes to us? We are rich, we are safe, we have everything which God gave us, and continues to give. He has given us all our intelligence, a heart, a will, a body, the world around us, the people around us, the relationships that are ours - all these are God's, because we cannot make them. We can force no one to love us, we cannot be sure of our mind; there are moments when we want to respond to a need, and our heart is of stone; we waver unsteadily between good and evil, and so forth.

If we only realise this, then we understand that we are totally destitute: we are nothing, we have nothing, and yet, so rich we are; because destitute, we are endowed with all the gifts of God; having betrayed Him time and again, we still are loved by Him. If we only realise our hunger for the real things, then they will come our way. The young man felt hungry. He felt hungry for his father's home, and yet he knew that he had no right anymore to call himself his son .... And yet he goes, because he still can call the man whom he rejected 'Father'.

And what happens then? The father sees him coming from afar off; he does not wait in dignity for him to fall at his feet and confess his sins; he rushes towards him, he embraces him! And the young man makes his confession: I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But at that moment the father stops him: you may not be worthy of being my son, and yet, you *are* my son, and you can not become a hired servant in your father's house... He requires of his son, as God requires of us, that we should be aware, and grow to the level of our human greatness: the children of the Living God called to be partakers of the divine nature, His sons and daughters in Christ and in the Spirit.

That is what this parable tells us; that is what we must reflect on: where do we stand to those first simple, cruel, murderous words of the young man? And are we aware of our dereliction? Are we hungry enough to realise that we must go home to the Only One who loves us, and Who, seeing us fallen, still claims from us the greatness of sonship.

## This Week We Celebrate

On Sunday February 28<sup>th</sup>: **Sunday of the Parable of the Prodigal Son**

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20 Gospel: Luke 15: 11-32

**Saint John Cassian** (435) (Properly 29<sup>th</sup> February)

On Monday March 1<sup>st</sup>: **Saint David (Dewi Sant)** of Wales (6<sup>th</sup> C)

On Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup>: **Saint Chad** Bishop of Lichfield (672)

**Saint Nicholas Planas** Parish Priest in Athens (1932)

On Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup>: **Saint Non** Mother of Saint David (6<sup>th</sup> C)

On Friday 5<sup>th</sup>: **Saint Piran** of Cornwall, Hermit at Perranporth (c480)

On Saturday 6<sup>th</sup>: **Saturday of the Dead (Eve of the Sunday of the Last Judgement)**

Commemoration of all who have fallen asleep from the beginning.

**Discovery of the Precious Cross and Precious Nails by the Empress Helena** (362)

## Return From Exile

On the third Sunday of preparation for Lent, we hear the parable of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15: 11-32). Together with the hymns of this day, the parable reveals to us the time of repentance as man's *return from exile*. The prodigal son, we are told, went to a far country and there spent all that he had. A far country! It is this unique definition of our human condition that we must assume and make ours as we begin our approach to God. A man who has never had that experience, be it only very briefly, who has never felt that he is exiled from God and from real life, will never understand what Christianity is about. And the one who is perfectly "at home" in the world and its life, who has never been wounded by the nostalgic desire for another Reality, will not understand what is repentance.

Repentance is often simply identified as a cool and "objective" enumeration of sins and transgressions, as the act of "pleading guilty" to a legal indictment. Confession and absolution are seen as being of a juridical nature. But something very essential is overlooked – without which neither confession nor absolution have any real meaning or power. This "something" is precisely the feeling of *alienation from God*, from the joy of communion with Him, from the real life as created and given by God. It is easy indeed to confess that I have not fasted on prescribed days, or missed my prayers, or become angry. It is quite a different thing, however, to realize suddenly that I have defiled and lost my spiritual beauty, that I am far away from my real home, my real life, and that something precious and pure and beautiful has been broken in the very texture of my existence. Yet this, and only this, is repentance, and therefore it is also a deep desire *to return*, to go back, to recover that lost home.

One particular feature of this Sunday of the Prodigal Son should be mentioned here. At Sunday Matins, following the solemn and joyful Psalms of the Polyeleon, we sing the sad and nostalgic Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and we wept when we remembered Zion..... If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy...

It is the Psalm of exile. It was sung by the Jews in their Babylonian captivity as they thought of their holy city of Jerusalem. It has become forever the song of man as he realizes his exile from God, and realizing it, becomes man again: the one who can never be fully satisfied by anything in this fallen world, for by nature and vocation he is a pilgrim of the Absolute. This Psalm will be sung twice more: on the last two Sundays before Lent. It reveals Lent itself as pilgrimage and repentance – as *return*.

## Noticeboard

### Services:

**Saturday February 27th:** Vigil for Sunday of the Prodigal Son – Saint Anne’s 6pm.

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup>:** Divine Liturgy - Plymouth 10.30, Torquay 10.30

**Saturday March 6<sup>th</sup>:** Vigil for Sunday of the Last Judgement – Saint Anne’s 6pm

**Daily:** Father Gregory continues to stream readings and prayers on the Plymouth facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/StsDemetriosNikitasPlymouthEngland>

Livestreamed normally at 8am but can be viewed at any time.

### Leaving and Coming Back

*Most of the poems I could find specifically on the subject of the Prodigal Son were, I thought, a bit trite. I did enjoy James Weldon Johnson’s hugely energetic The Prodigal Son from his collection God’s Trombones - Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, with its arresting opening lines ‘Young man, Young man, Your arm’s too short to box with God’ - but it is much too long to include here. You can find it on Poem Hunter at*

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-prodigal-son-6>

*Here instead are two separate poems, one about the urgent desire to leave, and one about the equally urgent need to return.*

#### The Collar

by George Herbert (1593 – 1633)

I struck the board, and cried, "No more;

I will abroad!

What? shall I ever sigh and pine?

My lines and life are free, free as the road,

Loose as the wind, as large as store.

Shall I be still in suit?

Have I no harvest but a thorn

To let my blood, and not restore

What I have lost with cordial fruit?

Sure there was wine

Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn

Before my tears did drown it.

Is the year only lost to me?

Have I no bays to crown it,

No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?

All wasted?

Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,

And thou hast hands.

Recover all thy sigh-blown age

On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute

Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,

Thy rope of sands,

Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee

Good cable, to enforce and draw,

And be thy law,

While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

Away! take heed;

I will abroad.

Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;

He that forbears

To suit and serve his need

Deserves his load."

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild

At every word,

Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*

And I replied *My Lord.*

#### I Will Arise

by Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Weary and weak,--accept my weariness;

Weary and weak and downcast in my soul,

With hope growing less and less,

And with the goal

Distant and dim,--accept my sore distress.

I thought to reach the goal so long ago,

At outset of the race I dreamed of rest,

Not knowing what now I know

Of breathless haste,

Of long-drawn straining effort across the waste.

One only thing I knew, Thy love of me;

One only thing I know, Thy sacred same

Love of me full and free,

A craving flame

Of selfless love of me which burns in Thee.

How can I think of thee, and yet grow chill;

Of Thee, and yet grow cold and nigh to death?

Re-energize my will,

Rebuild my faith;

I will arise and run, Thou giving me breath.

I will arise, repenting and in pain;

I will arise, and smite upon my breast

And turn to Thee again;

Thou chooseth best,

Lead me along the road Thou makest plain.

Lead me a little way, and carry me

A little way, and listen to my sighs,

And store my tears with Thee,

And deign replies

To feeble prayers;--O Lord, I will arise.

## Dewi Sant – Saint David of Wales (C500 – C589)

He became renowned as a teacher and preacher, founding at least twelve monastic settlements and churches in Wales, Dumnonia [Devon and Cornwall], and Brittany. St David's Cathedral stands on the site of the monastery he founded in the Glyn Rhosyn valley of Pembrokeshire. Around 550, he attended the Synod of Brefi, where his eloquence in opposing Pelagianism caused his fellow monks to elect him primate of the region. According to tradition he was consecrated bishop during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The strict monastic rule established by David prescribed that monks had to pull the plough themselves without draught animals, and must drink only water (hence he was known as Dewi Ddyfrwr - the water drinker) and eat only bread with salt and herbs. The monks spent their evenings in prayer, reading and writing. No personal possessions were allowed: even to say "my book" was considered an offence. It is thought that Saint David's pattern of monasticism had considerable influence in Ireland.

Sources: Wikipedia; HistoryUK

## 'The Simple Shepherd of the Simple Sheep' Saint Nicholas Planas 1851-1932

What is most notable about Papa-Nicholas (as people called him) are the things which were lacking in his life. He was no theologian and in fact had very few words to say at all – even to his closest followers. His life has no astounding feats of asceticism; he was a parish priest on the outskirts of a Athens. He did not die for the Faith or preach to the multitudes. He built no monasteries, no philanthropic institutions, nor even a single church. Yet each year on March 2nd the Orthodox Church universally recognizes Papa-Nicholas as a saint worthy of veneration and emulation.

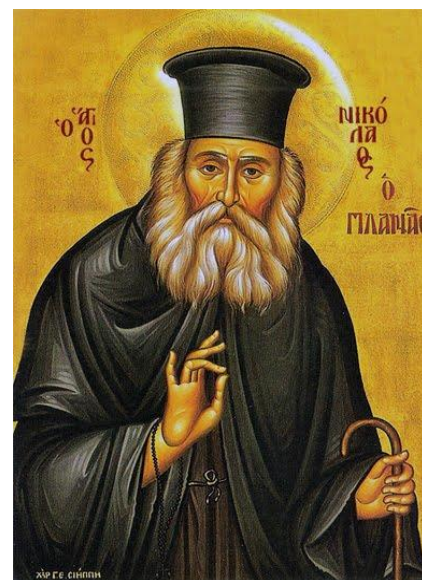
This is because he did the most important thing that any Christian can do, a simple task that he unwaveringly followed to his salvation and canonization: he listened to and performed God's will to the fullest degree possible within his circumstances. For this reason the Church joyously proclaims in a hymn to St. Nicholas:

As a simple shepherd of Christ God's lambs, you tended your flock well on the pasture of piety, nourishing their spirits with ceaseless supplications and leading them to Christ, O wise Father Nicholas.

Megalynarion for St. Nicholas Planas

Simplicity is the theme of Papa-Nicholas' life. He was a simple parish priest, who modestly performed the sacraments and services of the church, who cared for his flock with meekness, and who treated all with love and in innocence. It is this very simplicity which serves as an example for all of us (1).

Papa Nicholas was a perfect modern example of St. Seraphim of Sarov's instruction to "acquire the spirit of peace, and thousands around you will be saved." He shunned all occasions of argument. Once, when two wardens were quarrelling in his presence, he hid under a table—not out of timidity, but as a wise strategist of spiritual warfare. In advising one of his spiritual daughters on how to control her temper, he said, "Do you think, my child, that I don't know how to speak out? I know, but I think of the results, and so I keep quiet." Throughout his life his spirit of peaceful meekness constantly amazed everyone with whom he came in contact. Even when admonishment was called for, Papa Nicholas had no need of many words: his life itself, his very presence served to bring the erring soul to amendment, for he possessed an abundance of the grace of the Holy Spirit.(2)



(1) Sermon March 16<sup>th</sup> 2019 by Fr Matthew Swehla, St John the Baptist Orthodox Church, Portland Oregon [stjohngoc.org](http://stjohngoc.org)

(2) Article by Fr Alexey Young: Originally appeared in *Orthodox America* no. 56, Vol. VI, No. 6, January, 1986 including information from the book *Papa Nicholas Planas*, by the Nun Martha . Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1981.

## Update on Tsvetan – Fr Trayan's Father

*When we asked Father Trayan for an update on Tsvetan's state of health, he found he needed to start at the beginning and tell the whole story, not knowing 'which bits to leave out'. The result is such a moving account of the frustrations and worries of the past nine months that we couldn't think what to leave out either, so we have appended the story complete on P5.*

*Please keep Tsvetan, his wife Stoyanka, Mitko and Fr Trayan in your thoughts and prayers.*

## My father, Tsvetan

He was born on 2 Sep 1944, just a week before the Red Army entered Bulgaria. All his life he spent in secularism. When in 1993 I started going to church he was shocked.

So, my father couldn't understand my new zeal, and was tried to turn me aside from my new way of life. "Tsvetan" derives from "tsvete" (цвете) - flower, which means that his name day is on Palm Sunday (Цветница). It is Bulgarian tradition to go and visit the person on his nameday without invitation. Since he has plenty of friends, this would mean full house. We used to breed swine, so for Palm Sunday my parents used to kill a pig for the guests. Now imagine this picture: everyone is enjoying fresh pork, and Trayan is eating just chips. I had so many "attacks" from my parents and all the guests to "forget about the religious brainwashing". Since all of them were raised in communism they didn't know anything about faith, and at the same time the mass media were showing some American cults who were "gathering Bulgarian souls", so everyone was thinking that I was influenced by a sect.

My father calmed down after 1996 when I told him I had become an Orthodox Theology student, after my Economics, which I have never used for work (don't ask me, please, about the stock exchange). Both my parents changed their attitude towards faith. Not that they became church goers, no. But in 2018 they celebrated their 50 years anniversary and finally I persuaded them to get married in a church (they had only a civil marriage).

Last summer, 2020, my father noticed he can't move his thumb on his left hand. He went to a local doctor. My home town is just 15-20 thousand inhabitants, not at all a place of medical specialists. The doctor made a quick operation that should "release the nerve to the thumb". After a month dad noticed that all his left hand cannot move. The doctor rebuked him why he didn't do physio. But actually doctor hadn't said anything about physio.

My parents live on a farm with one acre of land. They work hard, no need of physio. In September he noticed problems with the other hand too. But they were in a rush to gather the crop. In October my father was driving the car with my mum starting the car and changing gears, because he couldn't do anything with both hands. In November they finally finished their agricultural work. Made the wine and went into the flat in the town. Now they had time to go to doctors, but only to local ones that don't have experience enough. He tried plenty of medicine, physio, no results; his hands were going from bad to worse.

I expressed my concerns to my friends. One said that in Sofia there is a specialist that cures with electric stimulations to the fingers, but it is not under national health service (NHS) and needed to be paid for. They stayed 10 days in Sofia going each day for the electric stimulation. No effect.

I was talking to my friend from North Devon, a Bulgarian dentist from Bideford, Hristo, about my father's problems. He advised me to get in touch with his brother, Nedko, who is a neurosurgeon at a university hospital in Sofia. I didn't know what „neurosurgeon“ means, or what is the connection with hands. When I called Nedko he asked me had we done an MRI scan. In Lom? (My hometown). MRI scan? No, of course.

Now I need to introduce another actor, Dimiter, or Mitko as we call him, my son, who studies Theology in Sofia. Good job it's online education now, so Mitko was and is "my right hand" in Bulgaria. I asked him to go and take his grandad to this MRI scan in Sf. They did it on 17 December. Nedko called me and said it is a tumour in the neck vertebrae and needs an emergency operation. The tumour was pressing the spinal cord, and since it was growing, in time it will block all the body. Again I was rebuked because I was sending my father so late. My parents didn't have things with them to remain in the hospital. My son took them back for 2 days home. On 19th Dec, before the admission on the "doorstep" of the hospital, they found he had COVID-19. Back to Lom for 14 days.

On 4 January, Mitko took just my father. As soon as they made the medical check up, they found his pulse rate was 176. So they quickly took him into the intensive care unit. At this moment my son fainted. (He is under 22). Extreme stress for everyone. He is okay. In intensive care doctors found my dad had a post-COVID lung embolism. They tied him to the pipes and nobody saw him. On the 7th day he asked Nedko to let him go home, he didn't want treatment. This was the day that I decided to go to Bulgaria and talk to dad.

I was in Bulgaria from 15 to 28 Jan. There were plenty of medicines that my father needed to take to recover from the embolism. Me and my son managed to persuade him to go back to hospital for the neck operation. Since it was not known when the operation would happen that's why I came back to the UK.

On 10 February my son took his grandad to the hospital and on 12th he was operated. Dr Nedko said he cut the tumour inside two vertebrae, released the pressure on the spinal cord, put a platinum mesh plate over these two vertebrae and screwed it to next vertebra. Bloodless surgery. The biopsy will be ready on Tuesday. We don't know what treatment will be appointed afterwards, probably chemotherapy.\*

For me it was a miracle that my father survived COVID and had this complicated operation and he is still alive. Me and my children talked to him about making confession, but he says: All my life I am working, I don't have anything to confess.

The doctor told me, I didn't tell dad, that he is not going to regain the use of his hands. If MRI scan had been made in September and operation straight away, probably yes. But my dad has an inner sense that he is not going to recover. Now he wants to die.

Just imagine being "in his shoes": you can't eat on your own, you can't drink water, you can't go to the toilet, you can't do anything. Just sleeping, watching telly and waiting to die. If I was him I would also want the same, but at least I would ask for a priest to visit me for confession.

Brothers and sisters, pray for him not to despair and not to long suffer.

Father Trayan



\* *Message from Fr Trayan Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup>:*

Dad's test result came out today. The biopsy showed "Fibrous Dysplasia," a bone disease that only occurred in adolescents. The doctor was shocked and made Mitko go to take the sample to another famous hospital for a second opinion from another doctor. The laboratory is currently closed, so Mitko will do it next week. Until then, my father has to do "tumor markers" + PSA marker for the prostate. Mitko is leaving for Lom today to drive his grandfather to laboratories. God help them both!