

## "We Must Celebrate and Rejoice"

Homily of March 21, 2004

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We have just listened to the story of the prodigal son. It is a story we are all familiar with, and one that is often used in the context of forgiveness and reconciliation. I would like if you would briefly reflect with me now on the three characters in this story: the father, his wayward son and his loyal, stay-at-home son. I invite us to do this as a way of determining which of these three personality profiles we think we fit into. I am going to be somewhat unconventional here, and work backwards. Let's begin by considering the third character in the story, the dependable, stay-at-home son.

Somehow I don't think any of us would fantasize about being like this sour elder son who, I suspect would have liked to do what his younger brother did but never had the guts. He simply festered away in the joyless fulfillment of duty. He is too timid to ask for anything for himself so that he can celebrate with his friends - if he has any! You see it is relatively easy to take the line of least resistance, never to rebel or question, never to make mistakes, always to play safe and so avoid trouble: borrrrrring! What a boring life. What a non-life.

It seems to me that this loyal son never risked anything. He ventured nothing, he played safe. For him, life was not about joy, discovery and growth, but rather about dry obedience, safety, stagnation. At the end of the story when the overjoyed father throws a party for his returned younger son, the elder son is unable to enter the house. His lack of love, of joy, of forgiveness, means he can have no part in celebration. He can have no part in the feast of life. At the end of the story he is the only character who remains unchanged. He is unable to move on, unable to grow, unable to live, enjoy and savor life. And that's sad.

O.K. let's leave Mr. Personality there and now have a look at his younger brother, the wayward son.

Well to begin with, this guy is no angel. Here we have a young man who wants to see the world, and a loving father lets him go. In fact, to Jesus' audience, the young son's initial request to be given his inheritance would have seemed totally outrageous. An inheritance is only given when your parents die. So the younger son is in effect saying to his father: as far as I'm concerned, you are dead, I want nothing more to do with you. Now that's not nice! So this son appears to be totally heartless and totally selfish. As I said: no angel.

Despite this, there is something very attractive about the younger son. Perhaps it's that we all have a sneaking regard for what he did: he set off in a spirit of adventure and sowed his wild

oats. We all know what it is to sin, to wander away from God, and even if we have not been as wild as the younger son in reality, perhaps we have at least dreamed of running off and ditching our responsibilities to live totally for the moment, totally for ourselves. We can all empathize with him to some extent.

What is especially attractive about the younger son is that he is fired up with energy, zeal, inquisitiveness. True, his fire blinds him to everything, it makes him selfish and heartless. But he grows. He learns by his mistakes. His virtue is not that he had the courage to run off and be sinful, but that he had the courage to learn from his mistakes, not to justify himself but to grow in self-knowledge and in appreciation of what is true, lasting and of value. His virtue - his strength - is that he knew when to say sorry, when to repent.

And finally, let's consider the father of these two boys.

I think the father figure in this story essentially represents God. A God who does not have favorites; a God who seeks out those who have strayed and welcomes them with unconditional love and forgiveness when they repent and return; and a God who splurges us with loving kindness when we seem to least deserve it. The father in the story declares: 'We must celebrate and rejoice.' And this is a reminder to us that we have much in our lives to celebrate and rejoice over. We have much to be grateful for. The question is: how grateful are we?

So which character in the story do you most identify with? Are you the elder son who lives in fear, wishing for things to be different but not daring to risk change? Do you live an upright, dutiful life at the expense of joy, friendship and love? Or do you identify with the younger son who was totally self-centered, but learned from his mistakes and allowed real change and growth to take place in his life? Or do you see yourself in the father figure who demonstrates the beauty, joy and celebration of life?

At the end of the day, what we need to remember is that we are an Easter people. A people of life and a people of hope. Hope is the extravagance of God's life, love and energy blooming all around us in creation and in the depths of every human heart. It is the energy that propels us to reach out in a spirit of forgiveness, reconciliation and communion to all people. And that is what it means to be Christian.