

Trinity IX (28 July 2024)

“It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

+In the Name...

When I was of high school age, I was a patron of what you might call an “old-fashioned” barber shop. You know the type: this was not a place to come and have your hair colored, curled or washed, but this was a place where men came as much to socialize as have anything done to their hair. One thing they all had was an appreciation of a small, unobtrusive sign which hung near the door. I never thought it was particularly funny, but all the men my father and grandfather’s age seemed to find it hilarious. Because of my lack of appreciation for it I never wrote it down, but I saw it this week on Facebook, as I was scrolling past all of the political mumbo-jumbo: “Children, now is your chance: go live your own life, get a job, pay your own bills. Don’t miss this opportunity to

move out while you STILL KNOW EVERYTHING!” If memory serves, those last three words we capitalized.

I wish I could tell you that I never thought so much of myself that I imagined me smarter than my parents, but of course I did, or at least thought so in regard to the subjects that “mattered”. Like many American undergraduates, I went “away” to school. Of course, I came home for Christmas and a couple of summer breaks, but spent more of the next five years “away” than I did at home. (Four years of school followed by one year of work.) When I did return to my parents’ house nearly five years later, I was utterly flabbergasted as to how much they had learned in a relatively short time. We agreed on so much more than we ever had before I was in college, it was simply uncanny. If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought that they had been majoring in “How to be sensible in the late 20th century” while I was away! Such is the blissful ignorance of youth.

And that brings us to this morning's gospel. Our blissfully ignorant youth, we don't know how old, but the younger of two sons, asks for his share of the inheritance in order that he might go out and see the world. Now Scripture doesn't tell us that this younger son was particularly unhappy with his life or that he thought he knew better how to run things than his gracious father, but one can assume that if he was perfectly content working in the fields, he never would have asked to leave. He took the sage advice found in that now-closed barber shop, (or at least the first half of it) although I'm sure the barber shop did not anticipate that a child would get his inheritance up front. This was not the norm at the time in Israel either. Like today, inheritance came when the father passed away. The father in question here was under no obligation to give this young son the thing for which he asked. Scripture does not tell us that the father knew what his son had planned for the money, but surely he knew his son. He could have guessed whether the son planned to invest in starting a business

or “wasting his substance on riotous living”. Do you see the parallel here? Our heavenly father was under no obligation to offer salvation to mankind as a race and is under no obligation to offer it to us individually.

So let’s talk about this “riotous living” in which the younger son engaged. Scripture says he went to a “far country”. Did he literally protest against the government and start riots? Perhaps, but probably not. What else might he have done? Perhaps he lusted after evil things? Maybe he idolized those whom he shouldn’t have. Do you think maybe he ate and drank to the point of gluttony? Did he commit fornication? How about murmuring? “You think your old man is bad? Mine expects me in the fields everyday from sunup until sundown,” or whatever. I’m sure children complaining about their parents hasn’t changed that much in 4,000 years. “My dad is so unfair; he took my donkey away. My dad is so unfair; he took the keys to the SUV away!” The technology is different, but the complaint is the same. So why did

I choose these particular sins for our young traveler? Do you recognize them from St. Paul's Epistle read this morning? He was talking about particular Christians in a particular place (Corinth), but there isn't a sin on that list that is not prominent in 21st century America.

What did it take to make our young man come around and see the error of his ways? He pretty much had to hit bottom. When he ran out of money, naturally all his new-found so-called friends disappeared on him as well. He was able to find work, but not just any work, caring for swine. This has nothing to do with farm labor, the emphasis is on the pigs. There was nothing more humiliating for a Jew to be employed doing than to have to care for swine. They were unclean by Jewish law, not just to eat but to be around or have anything to do with. And here he envied the food they were eating. The King James, calls them "husks". Other translations use the word "pods", which sometimes is referred to as "St. John's bread" because it was believed that St. John the

Baptist ate carob pods when he was in the wilderness. Only someone suffering from the most abject poverty would eat such a diet.

It is at this point that the younger of the two sons realizes his father was not such the fool that he previously thought he was. He resolves to get over his pride, return to his father's house (one in which he would technically have no stake since he was already given his fair share) and beg for forgiveness: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son." Do you remember the first time you ever heard this parable? I would guess most of us can't, but I wish I could. I wonder if adult converts, hearing this for the first-time wonder, if only for a split second, what the father is going to say. Will he tell him to leave? "Get off my land!" Will he laugh in his son's face with a hearty "I told you so!" No, as generously as he gave the son his inheritance some time back, he welcomes him with open arms,

gives him jewelry and clothes to wear, and throws a party to end all parties.

Again there is a parallel. This parable is actually the third in a series of three we find in Luke. The first is the lost sheep: the shepherd leaving the 99 to find the one who is lost. The second is the lost coin: the woman loses roughly a day's wages, and sweeps the house clean in order to find it. This parable could be called "The lost son." Do you know what the last verse before today's Gospel is? "Likewise, I say unto you, There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." The shepherd rejoiced over his found sheep, the woman rejoiced over her found coin, the father rejoiced over his found son. Likewise brethren, I can promise you much rejoicing in Heaven over any human being today who finds salvation. Like the father in our Gospel, our Heavenly Father will throw the party to end all parties when we get there, although I'm sure the one that happened that day in Israel some 2,000 years ago will pale in comparison to

what we will see in heaven. Like the old hymns says, “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus.”

So, the choice is ours. Are we going to be like the prodigal son before the swine incident? Are we going to be like the children referred to in that sign in the barber shop? Are we arrogant enough to think we know better how to run our lives than the God who created us? Or are we going to cautiously lift up our eyes to our loving father and while trembling say, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.” We have our guidebook: Holy Scripture. And we have our helper: Holy Mother Church. I admit it sounds simpler in theory than it turns out to be in practice, but St. Paul tells us this morning that we will not be tempted beyond what we are able to handle. That’s good news for us when things look bleak – when we’re doing the equivalent of feeding pods to the swine. Pray our Collect from the beginning of mass, that we may “think and do

always such things as are right” and “be enabled to live according to God’s will.”

See you at the party!

+In the Name...