

## "A CERTAIN MAN HAD TWO SONS"

### INTRODUCTION

There was a brief article in the NY Times on Monday, April 23rd, that caught my eye. I clipped it. It helps to launch today's sermon.

"Pope John Paul II said today that Doubting Thomas, the Apostle who, according to the Bible, would not believe in the Resurrection until he put his hand in the wounded side of Jesus, was 'particularly close to contemporaneous man'.

The Pope, addressing a crowd in St. Peter's Square before his customary Sunday blessing, strongly upheld the freedom to believe or not to believe. He stressed that religious faith must not be imposed by force.

He went on to say that the act of faith is by its very nature a free act. It is therefore fully in accordance with the nature of faith that, in religious matters, every form of coercion by man should be excluded."

His words helped to remind me that the "Word" of the Lord hits the world with the force of a hint. To the believer, could anything be more frustrating?

We want God to be God; but He wants to be a "still, small voice" - a babe in a manger. We want God to be all-powerful, so that we can be weak and dependent; but He wants to be all-loving, so that we can be strong. We want God to prove His existence; but He wants us to prove our freedom, to be able to act whole-heartedly without absolute certainty.

"God is love" means that God is known to us devotionally, not dogmatically. So the "Word" of the Lord has to hit the world with the force only of a hint. "Religious faith must not be imposed by force" said Pope John Paul II.

### DEVELOPMENT

The story of the Prodigal Son is a parable about all this, about an all-loving father who precisely because he is all-loving has to restrict his power, for love is self-restricting when it comes to power. As the story has a happy ending, we cheer the father. But suppose this boy had gotten knifed in a brothel, had died of hunger; or, on the contrary, had become a powerful ruler dictating the deaths of hundreds of his fellow citizens. Wouldn't we then have complained. "How could you let it happen?"

But that's the risk. The father could have said "nix" to any dividing of any estate, and kept the boy at home. But he could not have kept him filial. God, I suppose, could keep us all "at home", in the brute calm of servitude. But because love is the name of the game, He releases us into the storms of freedom, and then stands on the road trembling with concern.

### TWO JOURNEYS

Now a parable seeks to make only one point, but this story of Jesus is so rich it's hard - no, it's impossible - to leave it alone after it has made its one point about a father whose caring never ceases. For instance, it is clear that the older brother could no more handle his freedom than could the younger son handle his.

Let's think about this...

The story is really of two journeys, for the older son ends up as distant in spirit from his father as did his younger brother. Why, we can only speculate, but this much we know: the older brother's brand of moralism and legalism - "I never once disobeyed your orders....this son of yours" (notice he doesn't say "my brother") - this tight, narrow brand of moralism and legalism is almost always born in anxiety and nourished in more of the same.

Who knows, maybe he envied his younger brother's easy good looks, his high spirits, and, feeling somewhat inferior, projected that the father's love for him must be inferior, too. In any case, instead of trusting his father's love and becoming himself loving, he seeks instead to become virtuous - "I never disobeyed your orders"...."I slaved for you all these years". Can we not say that he who seeks virtue no longer seeks God or his neighbor.

For the search for virtue is too self-enclosing, too self-seeking, too self-justifying to be loving. I think we catch this at the end of the story. While the father sees the boy from afar, the older brother sees him from above. The father wants him restored, the older brother wants him punished. The father seeks what is good in the situation and tries to develop it, the older brother has clearly decided what is evil in this world, so that he will not have to come to grips with what is really good!

OLDER BROTHER Now I think the older brother beautifully reflects something that is there in all of us - that portion of our nature that seeks to develop an ethic rooted not in wickedness but in virtue, but in virtue not in love. Like the older brother we do not trust the love of a loving father. So instead of expressing ourselves in love, we try to prove ourselves in virtue. And, of course, we can only prove ourselves by "disproving" someone else - for pride is not accidentally but essentially competitive.

And reflections of the older brother are everywhere to be seen in our country. We see something of him in the Anita Bryants, the WCTU, in "law and order" people, in "leading citizens", in clergy and "pillars of the Church" - in short, wherever people tend to see themselves as little islands of virtue in a great sea of wickedness.

But St. Paul reminds us, "All have sinned and fallen short". We are flawed & all of us - and when we're honest we know that is true, which is why from one another we need so little judgement and so much love. So little judgement and so much love! It's often said disparagingly by some that the Church is a crutch. Of course the Church is a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?

SOMETHING ELSE There's something else. Berdyaev once wrote of his fellow Russian:

"There is something demonic in Tolstoy's moralism".

that was after Tolstoy's conversion - "something that would destroy all the richness of life".

Maybe it was the hypocrisy and suffocating moralism of the older brother that finally drove the younger one away; much as the virtuous portion of our own nature constricts the freedom loving portion. Je

For we love our freedom and the richness of this world. We don't want to deny either. Like trees and flowers, we want to bloom. Behind the bars of our ribs, there is a bird waiting to burst forth into song. In the heart of every one of us there's someone who wants to dance naked in the sun, grow like corn in the rain. So inevitably, from time to time, we feel we must take leave of our virtuous self in order to seek our freedom.

But the freedom we seek is often merely anti-establishment, anti-virtue; a freedom from, not a freedom for. Basically, it's aimless. And while aimless, freedom is admittedly heady and exhilarating, it quickly becomes decadent, as we see in this story and can hear in these words of the poet:

"Deliver me from myself:  
My journeys are all the same, Father,  
I can't find my life  
I'm lost in my name.  
I must be more than what I see. O Jesus,  
Save this roaring boy riding the devil's blast."

It's a bit too simple to put it this way, but I think basically it's true: in each of us dwell the older brother and the younger brother, just as both live in our land in the form of a rather moralistic establishment and a rather chaotic anti-establishment. And what is needed, within and without, is not only that they should confront each other, but that they should confront a reconciling father.

An individual is not one who separates himself from others. An individual is one undivided within. And isn't that what we see in Jesus in such compelling form? From the outer periphery to the inner core and back again, he's all of a piece. One piece. Undivided. Whole.

And had anyone asked Him, "Jesus, do you consider yourself a part of the establishment or part of the anti-establishment?" He probably would not have recognized the question because He never recognized the authority of the establishment in the first place. To Jesus, truth was His authority, not some authority His truth. And because His truth was a love transcending earthly divisions He was able to heal them. Remember how with equal freedom He ministered to Nicodemus and Mary Magdalene.

TODAY So, today, why don't we let the still, small voice of reconciliation reach deep inside each of us? To the virtuous portion of our nature, God is saying, "Why so tense? You're all right. You're OK. My love doesn't seek value; it creates it. You don't have to prove yourself; I've taken care of all of that. You have only to express yourself". And there's a world of difference between proving ourselves and expressing ourselves.

Then to the wayward portion God says: "Thou your sins are as scarlet they shall be white as snow. You are forgiven. Your value has been restored, and because your life is valuable, don't throw it away...don't handle it carelessly."

Freedom is given NOT that we should throw, but give our lives away, and for the same high purpose for which Christ gave His. Christ will not rise in us unless we hear deep in our hearts:

"This is My body, broken for you" - broken that you might be united, you with yourself, you with everyone else in the world!"

And so let our prayer to our Lord be:

"O Jesus, save these warring boys: warring within and warring without. Confound the virtuous and save the wayward by filling the hollow in the heart, the empty place in our life, where love should always be."

PRAYER     Lead us, O Lord, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of the Last Supper of thy Son, Jesus.

May we see there plainly, clearly and simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all thy people everywhere.

Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to thee, that we may go out renewed in body and soul, fed and nourished and made new. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS: May 6, 1979

HOLY COMMUNION It is the custom of this parish to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month. We like to announce, especially for the benefit of visiting friends, that the Table of our Lord is open to all.

One does not have to be a member of this parish nor of this denomination to receive the Sacrament; we invite and encourage all of you to receive it here this hour and trust that the time for you may be an occasion of spiritual renewal, a time of reaffirmation and rededication of your life to the will of God, through Jesus Christ. The elements will be served to you in the pews. Upon receiving them, please hold them until all have been served and then together, as one family of faith, we shall commune.

VISITORS We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning. It is a joy to have you with us and we hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more personal way following the service - either at the door or at the coffee hour.

Be free in the sharing of your name with us; sign one of our Guest Books and join us on other Sundays in our worship and in our fellowship. You worship in a Church that has been ministering in the name of Christ to people in this city since 1837. We bid you welcome.

CONCERNS During the month of May we shall receive gifts for the Health Care Agencies of our NY Conference. We have five homes in our conference that minister to the senior citizens. They need our support. An envelope for a gift is in the pew. Those envelopes will be there throughout the month of May and on one of these Sundays we hope you will respond with a gift.

Note the other announcements in the bulletin. Be sure to pick up your copy of the "Word in Edgeways". Also note that next Sunday we shall hold a Bake Sale during coffee hour to help finance the All-Church picnic of May the 26th. Tickets for the Picnic are on sale again today. They cost \$3.50. The Picnic will be one of the highlights of the month and we hope that at least 100 children and adults will be a part of that day away from the city.

JESUS SAID "It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.