Homily:  LUKE 15:1-3, 11B-32  The Prodigal Son

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

LAETARE! Rejoice, again I say rejoice!

Let’s back up a little, and see where that comes from. It is, after all, the season of Lent. Jesus, our Prince of Peace, our Emmanuel, our hope and promise of redemption and eternal life, our precious Jesus with no sin on him, the one who healed so many, raised people from the dead, fed the five thousand, said so many unforgettable wise things, brought hope to the multitudes: He is heading towards his execution on the Cross; such an awful time of sorrow and agony. And for why? To save us from having to pay the penalty for our sins. To give us instead eternal life in Heaven with God.

We should be mourning our errors, grieving for our sinfulness. You know, the kind of repentance when you remember unexpectedly something very bad you did, perhaps long ago, when you didn’t know any better, or gave way to anger, or allowed a desire for revenge to overcome your better nature, or simply said something “witty” that was actually pretty mean and hurtful. The sort of thing, that when you think about it in the middle of the night, prevents you from sleeping until well past sunrise. Lent is a time for repentance and reflection - truthful and painful reflection - and sorrow and sacrifice and prayer as we prepare to greet the risen Christ on Easter Sunday. And repentance is our theme this morning, with the story of the prodigal son. Let’s remember this is a Jewish story, told by the most passionate Jew ever, that would be Jesus, in a different era and a different society from the one in which we live. It was very much an ‘honour and shame’ society, where outward appearances mattered more than internal truth - and Jesus with his expressions such as ‘whited sepulchre’ was not in favour of hypocrisy, in fact Jesus was not in favour of quite a lot of the things that happen in our gospel portion today. And in those days most people lived in small villages, where everybody knew everybody’s business, and everybody was very judgemental. People could be even more indignant about other families’ business than about the shortcomings of their own. Reputation was all.

In the first place, the younger son, by asking for his expected inheritance early, was extremely disrespectful; it more or less amounted to publicly saying he wished his father was dead. And the elder son did nothing to prevent the division of the estate – also disrespectful, nor did he try to reconcile his father and brother, which was his clear duty. The fact that the father didn’t explode with anger over the younger son’s demand shows how loving and indulgent a parent he was. Much as God is incredibly loving and giving to his children. See the parallel here? God the father dealing with two less than perfect children. That would be us. The father gave in to the younger son, allowing him to express his free will. Huge amounts of food for gossip. There would have been
discussion about the event around every dinner table for months and for miles around. The younger son of course did the same with his money as any other immature and foolish kid does with a large payout. He spends it on high living - nowadays they buy a big truck and party away the rest, sell the truck and party that away too - and fetch up destitute. And in this case, worse than destitute: he has to take a very offensive job for a Jew, he has to tend a herd of pigs. And he’s so hungry he’s even willing to eat the pigs’ food. Apparently the wild carob pods fed to pigs were disgusting to eat, and lacking in nourishment, and however careless the lad was, as a Jew he couldn’t even think about eating pork. And so he came to his senses: he realized that if he went home, and said he was sorry, at the very least his father would take him in, and see him fed. Kind of like God?
Sincere repentance brings forgiveness. And, oh my, didn’t it just work out like that for the younger son? His father comes running out to welcome his kid, saving the youth from the anger of the neighbors, who are quite prepared to actually beat the wayward son, giving the son shoes, to show he isn’t a slave - slaves didn’t get shoes, giving the son the best clothing in the house to show he’s a member of the family, giving the son a seal ring to show he’s trusted to do family business, and providing a feast to feed the whole village to encourage everybody to at least outwardly welcome the lost and recovered son of the family back to the fold.

And so it is with God: when we repent our sins, he gladly forgives, he forgives us until our cups are running over with forgiveness. God wants us to be happy, he wants us to be part of the family, an honoured and beloved part of the family. However awfully we have sinned and misbehaved, he loves us anyway. The invitation to turn back to God and bask in God’s love is always open. Repent early, repent often!

As for the sulky older son, our identification with him is mistaken. Naturally, as an eldest child, it has taken me a long time to overcome my sympathy for him and his indignation, and to realize that he never lost his position, as eldest and respected child. Indeed, the father bent so far from his dignity as the paterfamilias as to leave the feast and try to persuade the older son, who wasn’t exactly perfect himself, to come in and join the party.

As I say, it took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that I actually have more in common with the spendthrift than the dutiful son. I daresay that if we’re honest, so do most of us here. So, I say, in this Lenten season of sorrow for the pain our sins have given to God, so that God sent his only Son to save us: in this time of repentance, isn’t it wonderful to know that God forgives us, and more than forgives us, God restores us to his family?

Laetare: Rejoice, again I say rejoice!

Amen