

Feast of the Holy Family, Cycle C December 27, 2009

Readings: 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28; 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24; Luke 2:41-52

An Extended Family

Christmas is a time for being with family. I was fortunate to be able to spend last Wednesday evening celebrating at our house with all of our children and grandchildren. And on the next evening, Christmas Eve, they were all able to join us as we visited my parents along with my three brothers and two sisters and their families; fifty people, four generations from five months to 87 years—all in a two-bedroom condo without a basement. It was very cozy. On Christmas Day, however, it got a lot quieter as my son and one of my daughters celebrated with their in-laws. And yesterday we took my daughter and son-in-law to the airport so they could make a side trip to see his folks in Indianapolis before they return to Seattle. There's a lot of need for understanding, communication, and compromise to avoid friction and hurt feelings that can be caused when someone feels cheated out of their fair share of family time. It can be a real juggling act for the kids to try to keep everyone happy.

The Feast of the Holy Family which we celebrate today is a relatively new feast in the Church; it was established by Pope Benedict XV in 1921. He wanted to promote family life at a time when there was much change in family dynamics brought about by suffering from World War I and by the industrial revolution. The timing of the feast corresponds to our reflection on the Holy Family during the Christmas season, but I can't help but think that the timing is especially appropriate for us today because it is a time of year that we particularly appreciate being with our families. People go to extraordinary effort to travel to be with family even if it is for only a few days or hours. Our daughter's best friend moved in with us after high school and has become part of our family. She now lives in Baltimore and her own family lives in Cleveland. She left Baltimore on Christmas Eve morning and drove to Romeo to spend Christmas Eve with us, and then got up first thing on Christmas morning to drive back to Cleveland to be with her own family. It was a great gift for her to extend her trip by another three hours each way just to spend a few hours with us.

And Jesus, Mary, and Joseph did a fair amount of travelling. We don't know much about their family life from scriptures, but we do know about some of their travels. We know that Mary made a difficult journey to help Elizabeth. We know that Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem that first Christmas. We know that they had to flee and hide away to avoid Herod's effort to kill the newborn King. And this morning we hear about how they travelled eighty-five miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. We can imagine that the Holy Family was in many respects like any other family; there was love and wonder and they were not spared anxiety. As parents, we can try to put ourselves in the sandals of Mary and Joseph and imagine what anguish they suffered while searching for Jesus for three days. But Jesus' family extended beyond that of Mary and Joseph, and He had to spend some time in His Father's house as well.

Through our baptism's we participate in a very large extended family of all baptized Christians. We are all brothers and sisters with Christ and, as we heard in our second

reading, we are all children of God. It is difficult for us to understand and comprehend. St. John tells us in his letter: ***“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed.”*** We do not understand God the Father’s will for us, or what the future holds for us, but that should not stop us from trying to find it, accept it, and follow it.

And we look to Mary as a model. We know that she was blessed and full of grace, but that she did not completely know what was in store for her. She accepted God’s will without fully knowing what it was; she learned along the journey. On Christmas morning we heard in our gospel how the shepherds visited the Holy Family. They made known the message that had been told to them by the angels. And the gospel stated: ***“And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”*** This morning, Mary and Joseph were relieved to find Jesus and asked why He had done this to them. He responded: ***“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”*** And very similarly to what we heard on Christmas morning, scripture states: ***“But they did not understand what he said to them....and his mother kept all these things in her heart.”***

Jesus was twelve years old and Mary was only slowly learning the mysteries of her Son. Mary kept what she learned and heard in her heart and reflected upon it; she slowly grew in understanding. She accepted a great role in salvation history without knowing how the story would progress or end.

And I think this can give us great comfort and peace. As parents, we can be comforted knowing that it’s okay not to have all the answers about raising our children; that there is a certain dimension of on-the-job training that comes along with this choice of vocation. We simply do our best and offer our love. As Christians, we can be comforted that it’s okay to not fully understand what God has planned for us. But like Mary, we must say yes to God and agree to join Him on the journey even if we don’t fully understand all the ups and downs of the journey, nor where it will lead us. We say yes because God is our Father and we are His children. Out of love He offers us a divine inheritance. Out of respect for our Father we owe Him our obedience. With our own children we expect them to do what they are told without questioning, without asking why, especially when they are small and lacking in knowledge and understanding. We are all small children lacking in knowledge and understanding. We need to spend more time on reflecting on what the Father wants us to do, and less time asking why He wants us to do it. And we are told in John’s letter what God wants us to do: ***“And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us.”***

If we follow this commandment our families will turn out fine; they will be holy families.

Deacon Joe Hulway