

Holy Family + 29 Dec 2024 + I Sam 1 + I John 3 + Luke 2:22-40

Our Gospel today has the very curious episode of Jesus getting separated from his parents. Now, we might wonder how in the world could Mary and Joseph have lost their 12-year-old son? But we need to remember that in the time of Christ, families were much larger than what we typically think of today: multiple generations and layers of family units would have been traveling together as one. Even more, they probably didn't have the fear of strangers that we have today. It would not have been bad parenting to assume that Jesus was just somewhere in the "caravan" of pilgrims heading home from Jerusalem.

At any rate, the 3 days they spent looking for him was also not implausible; perhaps they spent one day traveling, one day retracing their steps, and found Jesus on the third day. But there is a great theological significance to the 3 days that Mary and Joseph spent searching for Jesus. That is, it points forward to another time when Mary will be without her son for 3 days—the 3 days he spent dead in the tomb before His resurrection. So we have already a clear foreshadowing of the passion that Jesus would undergo some 20 years later.

Next, we hear how Mary's 3 day-long worry spills out: *Son, she says, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.* To which Jesus replies, *why were you looking for me? Did you not know I must be in my father's house?* Is Jesus being a smart-aleck pre-teen here? Of course not. Jesus' reply is an honest answer to his mother's question. As we recalled on Christmas Eve, Jesus *is* in His true Father's house. He was exactly where He should be—in the Temple, in the House of God. In fact, in this moment, the Temple in Jerusalem becomes most fully the Temple: for it became the very dwelling place of God on earth.

Finally, we hear that the Holy Family is reunited and lives in peace in Nazareth, with Jesus advancing in *favor before God and man*. In this last scene, Jesus' early life recalls that of the prophet Samuel, who we heard about in our 1st reading today. After Samuel is presented in the Temple by Hannah his mother, the text will go on to record Hannah's song of praise for having been given a child by God, which is echoed by Mary in her own song of praise to God for becoming the mother of the Savior, her *Magnificat*. The text also notes that Samuel, just like Jesus, grew *in favor with God and man* (I Sam. 2:28). In this way, we see how the shadows of the Old Testament are finally being made clear in the coming of Jesus, who is the fulfillment of God's promises to every age. This incredible reality is not lost on Mary, who ponders and keeps *all these things in heart*.

So now we bring this meditation on the Holy Family into our lives today: what does this rare glimpse into the childhood of Jesus have to reveal to us about family life today? Well first, a very practical and important lesson. I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but the Holy Family reminds parents of their solemn duty to teach their children by example.

Specifically, to teach their children that nothing, not even sports, is more important than God. In our Gospel today, we hear how Mary and Joseph *went up (to the Temple for the Passover) according to the festival custom*. Meaning, they were obedient to the Law of God, which was not easy nor comfortable. We are talking about a 5 day walk *by foot* from Nazareth to Jerusalem, and 5 days back home, on most likely a dusty gravel road! We might relate this observance to the 1st precept of the Church: *to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation and rest from servile labor*, which itself is rooted in the 3rd commandment *remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy*. Our 2nd reading reminds us that we must keep the Commandments to remain in God, choosing God even over sports on Sunday.

Next, we should not overlook the fact that God chose to be born and raised, humanly speaking, in a family. Contrary to what some say these days, the human family is not an artificial construct of society which can be changed at will. The family is an image, an imperfect yet real ikon of God, and that is why the Church continues to stand up for it in spite of fierce opposition. The Catechism says that *the Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit (2205)*. In the Trinity, the self-giving love between the Father and the Son is so strong that it is a person: the Holy Spirit. Likewise, in the Sacrament of Marriage, the self-giving love between a husband and a wife is so strong that it can even create a new life, if God wills it. In other words, if we get the family wrong, we falsify the truth of who God is!

Furthermore, it should bring us great comfort to know that by being part of a human family, Jesus sanctified—that is, made holy, family life. Yes, Jesus was perfect, Mary was conceived without sin, and St. Joseph was, well, a Saint. But that doesn't mean their life was easy or perfect at every moment. This little episode in our Gospel of Jesus being “lost” illustrates that point. Family life, with all of its joys and trials, is a proving ground where most of us learn, are tested, and finally receive the grace to hopefully become Saints too.

And that brings us to our final lesson today, where Jesus reminds parents of a very difficult but critical truth: *your children are not your own*. They belong to God. Clinging too tightly is not real love. Children are only on loan to parents for a time, to love, educate, and to give back to God. God the Father asks parents to raise children to *advance in wisdom and favor before God and man*, so that they are fully prepared to say *yes* to their calling—their vocation—in life. Through their vocation, they too will become images of God in the world. When Jesus asked, *Did you not know I must be in my Father's House*, it must have stung a little in the hearts of Joseph and Mary. But this was a lesson that they perhaps had to be reminded of: that the true Father of us all is God the Father, as we hear in our 2nd reading. Just as every child is a gift, not a right, so being children of God is a gift, not a right. And this gift of being adopted into the very family of God is the best gift that anyone could ever receive!