

Holy Family 2000

I am fond of today's gospel story. For it shows the holy family to be an ordinary family, having to deal with some of the normal stresses and anxieties of family life. The three travel from the small village of Nazareth, where everyone knows everyone else, to the big city of Jerusalem. It is Passover time the busiest and most chaotic time of the year. And in first century Palestine, Jerusalem at Passover is a dangerous time, rebellion and resentment at the Roman occupation are in the air. Hopes for Messianic liberation are ubiquitous and contagious. In fact the Roman governor marks Passover by moving from to Jerusalem from the coast to stay on top of things and keep order.

Jesus is twelve, and like most twelve year olds, he thinks that he is already a wise, mature adult. The family has made this pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year, and so it is old hat for him. He thinks nothing of staying behind in the temple, fascinated with the discussions he hears among the rabbis, even chipping in his own two cents worth from time to time. And the rabbis take a shine to this precocious young boy. They are impressed with his insight. Jesus is having the time of his life.

Meanwhile Joseph and Mary head back to Nazareth with their relatives and neighbors. It's a big group, and since everyone knows and looks out for everyone else, they are not initially that concerned that Jesus is not with them. He is probably with his friends in another part of the caravan. But after a day of looking for him they realize he is not in the group after all.

You can imagine their panic. Their twelve year old son alone in the big city at its most chaotic and dangerous. They hurry back and search for him high and low, surely with little hope of success. After all its not like they can turn to the police for help—there is no police, only Roman soldiers whose job is to enforce the peace, not look for lost boys. Surely he is dead in a gutter somewhere by now, or abducted into slavery. After three days of what can only be described as a living hell, they finally finding him, in the temple of all places, hanging out with the rabbis.

His parents reaction is just what we would expect: "Son why have you done this to us?" Mary asks. Jesus response is priceless. The rabbis may find him thoughtful but towards his parents he is oblivious. "Why did you search for me? Did you not know I had to be in my Father's house?" No apology, no word of remorse. On the contrary *he* scolds *them*. Our text says

that Mary and Joseph were dumbfounded. And who can blame them? Dollars to donuts, Jesus was grounded for a very long time after pulling such a stunt.

There is a wonderful closing scene in a French movie about Mary, “Je te salut Marie” literally “Hi Mary” or as in the English title ”Hail Mary”. In a typically French way of spending an afternoon, the holy family are enjoying a picnic in the countryside. We catch them at the end, as they are packing the car up for the trip back. They tell Jesus to get in. But he doesn’t want to . He protests, I must be about my Father’s business” Joseph responds, “Shut up and get in the car.”

As I said, I like this story because it shows the holy family as an ordinary family, having to deal with the ordinary stresses and strains of family life. I like it because it proves that such stresses do not prevent Mary and Joseph and Jesus from **being** a holy family. Nor do they prevent our own families from being holy as well. For holiness is not a matter of everything always going right, holiness is not a matter of people never getting upset with one another, holiness is rather a quality of commitment, a quality of love that can keep a family together despite the stresses and strains of life. Holiness is a matter of working through the tensions and frustrations that inevitably arise rather than trying to sweep all unpleasantness under the rug. Holiness is not a matter of purity, but of wholeness and wholeness can only be had by acknowledging our limitations and working through our problems together.

The gospel addresses the stresses and strains of a young family. The first reading speaks as well of the stresses and strains of family life at the other end, when it is the parents rather than the children who need looking after, and when sons and daughters, now full grown are called to care for their parents who had cared for them. This too can be a time of challenge as parents health begins to fail and their minds begin to dim.

But it too can also be a holy time, a time to give something back in love and gratitude for all that our parents have been for us over the years. “Kindness to a father, or a mother, will not be forgotten” says Sirach, “It will serve as a sin offering—it will take lasting root.” We are all imperfect, limited, and sinful beings. But holiness can still enter our lives by how we relate to those other imperfect, limited and sinful beings to whom we belong. May God give us the grace to be a source of grace to all our family.