

Holy Family

For most of us Christmas is when we can spend time with our families. It is something that we have been especially looking forward to this year, a year when it was much harder for us to travel and to gather with those we love. For those who were not able to gather, it is a phone call or an email that connects us to those far away.

Perhaps this year we have more often given thanks for our families than we usually do. We have relied upon their love and support when things have been tough. We have missed them when they have not been there. As I am growing older, I am more conscious of how my family has shaped me and continues to influence who I am. That influence can be both positive and negative, but I am fortunate enough to say that it is the positive side that wins out. Among the many gifts that I have received from my family is the gift of faith.

On this feast of the Holy Family the readings that we have been given seem to say a lot about that gift of faith. The reading from the Book of Genesis reminds us of the extraordinary faith that Abram had. He and his wife were well past the age when they could have children of their own. But God promised Abram that he would have a son, born of his wife Sarah. He told him to look up at the night sky and to believe that he would have as many

descendants as the stars that he could see there. And Abram put his faith in the Lord.

The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews remembers the faith of Abraham and Sarah. It presents their faith to us as a model of the kind of faith that we are invited to live. In one of our Eucharist Prayers we call Abraham our father in faith.

Our gospel helps to understand something of the family into which Jesus was born. Luke makes the point that Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish family who took very seriously their responsibilities to one another and to the God who gave them life and cared for them every day. Because Mary and Joseph were such people of faith, they had made room in their hearts and in their lives for the gift of their son. Now they were giving him back to the God from whom he had come. This act of devotion becomes another great moment of revelation for the Holy Family.

When we look at today's gospel, we can see that when Jesus was taken to the temple, he was warmly welcomed by two people of great faith, Simeon and Anna. They welcomed Jesus because they were looking forward to his coming, what Luke calls the comforting of Israel. And because they were open and ready for the Lord's coming God fills them with the gift of his Spirit. They

are prophets who make known what human eyes cannot see. This is what faith allows each one of us to do. Simeon can tell us that the promise that God had made to him has now been fulfilled. In the child he sees the salvation of Israel. He reveals to Mary and Joseph and to all of us who this child is that is being presented to God in the temple. He speaks about his mission as bringing light to the pagans and glory to the people of Israel.

This child is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel. He will be a sign that is rejected. He speaks to Mary who here is the personification of the people of Israel. “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Israel will be a divided people, cut in half by the sword of God’s Word. Some will accept Jesus and rise to life in Him. Many will reject Him and fall. We are told here that Mary wondered at the things that were being said about Him. A little later we are told that she pondered all these things in her heart.

Luke tells us that when they had done everything that the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. They went back to that obscure place, to live a normal family life. Those things that had been revealed in the temple about Jesus and his mission were not forgotten, but they were put aside. But all that Jesus experienced at home was influenced by the faith of Mary and Joseph. Jesus would not begin his

mission for another thirty years. He had to learn what it meant to be fully human, so that he could fulfil his mission perfectly. He went home with Mary and Joseph to learn what it meant to be loved and to love, so that He could teach us all how much His Father loves us. Jesus went home to learn to be a person of faith as Joseph and Mary were.

It is almost a foot note in the Gospel when Luke tells us, “Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God’s favour was with him.” But all that happened quietly yet very powerfully in a very ordinary family at Nazareth. Today, as we remember what happened at Nazareth, we can thank God that he is present in every family, allowing us to grow to maturity, filling us with wisdom and teaching us to believe that God’s favour is with us.