

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY / YEAR C27 DECEMBER 2015

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14; 1 Jn 3:1-2, 21-24; Lk 2:41-52

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Today's Feast of the Holy Family reminds me of one of the lighter scenes in the movie "The Passion of the Christ" – an otherwise very intense, powerful film. It was the flashback to Mary in the backyard with Jesus as an adult, where, as a carpenter, he's working on a new invention – a table, like one we would use today. Mary asks Jesus to explain how it would work, and he tells her that people would sit upright on chairs and eat directly from the table, instead of reclining on the floor, as was then the custom. Mary kind of laughs and says, "It will never catch on!" It's kind of a fun anecdote – the inspiration of screenwriting, not Scripture – but it sets the stage for the idea of the Holy Family.

Christmas very naturally gets us thinking about our families, and now – because of the calendar this year, after just 48 hours or so – we celebrate this feast of the Holy Family. In my family, I'm the youngest of four children. In my wife Lorene's family, she's the third oldest in a family of ten. ~~ And Jesus was an only child. Regardless of the size of our families, we all have unique experiences we could relate – some good memories that we cherish, and some that were not so good, perhaps.

The account of a 12-year old Jesus in today's Gospel is something that must have straddled the line between "good" and something of more concern for Mary and Joseph, on a number of counts. They had gone with their larger family of relatives and friends on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The men traveled together in one group, while the women went together in another, as was the custom. On the return trip, after one day, Jesus was discovered missing. Because they were traveling with family, there was some sense that he was somewhere among them, but there was still concern – and, after three more days of searching in Jerusalem, I'm sure it was considerable concern.

When they found him in the Temple in Jerusalem, this 12 year old Jesus responded that they should have known he would be in his Father's house. And we're told that Mary and Joseph really didn't understand what he said to them, but that Jesus returned with them to Nazareth and was obedient to them. And toward the end of the Gospel, Luke notes that Mary "kept all these things in her heart." We don't know any other details about this incident in Jerusalem. This is, in fact, the only thing we hear in the Scriptures about the childhood of Jesus, from his young life into adulthood.

This story about Jesus at age 12 is important as an early indicator about the true nature of Jesus as the Son of God, and about his mission here on earth. He was in "his Father's house", among learned men, who were amazed at his wisdom. This wasn't normal activity, and we can only imagine what Mary and Joseph felt and thought – given what they already knew and experienced. But we can only speculate about it, because the Scriptures don't tell us anything more. What the

Gospel does tell us is that Jesus returned with them to Nazareth, was obedient to them, and “advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.” And that much is what presents us with this image of the Holy Family – which is something we can look to in our own lives for example and hope.

Just as Jesus is the Son of God and Son of Mary, we, through our Baptism in Christ, are made adopted sons and daughters of our Father and Creator. And, in that same sense, we also look to Mary as our Mother, as well. The figure of St. Joseph in the Scriptures is a relatively quiet one. We don’t know much about him. We don’t have the guidance of his words in the Scriptures to look to, but, very importantly, we do have his example to aspire to in our own lives. As it was with Mary, Joseph accepted what the Lord presented to him. It was an enormous act of faith. And so, we can also look to St. Joseph as a father-figure for our lives.

Regardless of how our individual family lives were growing up – and how positive or negative the experience of our parents in our lives was – we can always view ourselves as part of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, because we most certainly are part of that family – in each of them individually, and as a whole. The Holy Family is *our* family. We should look to each of them as examples of how to live our lives. Their holiness was not something remote in their lives, it was something very real – as our holiness should be in ours.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council stressed in their documents that we are each called to holiness. And the holiness in our lives – as it was with Mary and Joseph in theirs – needs to be integrated with the practicality of everyday living. An awareness of our God must be present there while at the same time we continue our mortal struggles. We can’t ultimately successfully deal with the world if we are not being attentive to the presence of God and His mercy in our lives. We can try, but it just isn’t going to work. It isn’t going to feel right; it isn’t going to be right. Something will be missing.

Mary said “yes” to God, and Joseph said “yes” to God. They both retained that sense of God as the focus of their lives, and their “yes” wasn’t any easier than ours was, or will be. And just like Mary and Joseph, we don’t understand sometimes, but we need to step out on faith and trust that what God has in store for us is what’s right, and what’s good for us, in the end. And just like Jesus, sometimes we just need to be about Our Father’s business. We need to be there where we’re called to be. For most of us, it isn’t going to be in a Temple or in a Church. But wherever it is we find ourselves doing – or about to do – the work of God, that’s where we belong at that time, and, we should acknowledge that – to ourselves, if not maybe even to others.

“And he was obedient to them.” What’s more difficult for us – faith or obedience? *Obedience requires faith, and faith encourages obedience.* And that obedience isn’t mitigated by the difficulty of what confronts us. If anything, it’s made more necessary by it. That is what is perfectly shown in the examples of faith and obedience by Mary and Joseph in God’s plan for our salvation.

*Their* unknowing is our unknowing. *Their* doubts are our doubts. *Their* strivings are our strivings. And our faith and obedience need to be indicative of the faith and obedience they exhibited – in situations that I suspect will always be far more demanding and awesome in scope than anything we will encounter in this life. But our struggles are no less real, and God knows that full well.

Someone once wrote that “the search for God must animate one’s whole life, determining all choices.” That was very obviously true for the Holy Family. It’s true for us, as well. May it be so – that as part of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, our search for God will animate our whole life, determining all our choices.

