

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (B)
(Genesis 15:1-6,21:1-3 / Luke 2:22-40)
28.12.2014

On this Sunday within the Octave of Christmas we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family.

Sometimes the Holy Family of Nazareth is presented in a way that makes it sound as if everything in the garden was rosy for this little family unit. Pious representations can lead us to imagine that there was never a misunderstanding between Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and, unlike our families, they were not subjected to exterior pressures of any sort.

If we read the gospel accounts attentively and intelligently we know that there is no basis for such romantic notions. We grasp that this family actually got it tough in many ways. Because of this the Holy Family provides us with an example to follow when life is not easy for us; we come to see that we can draw inspiration from them whenever we encounter difficulties of one sort or another in our own family lives. If, however, we buy into the romanticists' presentation of things what we do is short-change ourselves. Lifting the saints of the Holy Family up on to pedestals and seeing Jesus in such a way that we deny His humanity and the impact His ordinary, human experiences had upon Him, we place the Holy Family at an inimitable distance from where we are at in life.

The way the Bible presents their story shows us that the Holy Family of Nazareth did not get it easy as they made their way through life.

Just think of their story.

This family was faced with all sorts of challenges from the beginning to the end!

Joseph and Mary were under great pressure from the outset.

... Think of the difficulties and the misunderstanding that surrounded Mary and Joseph before they came to live together, because of the extraordinary circumstances of Christ's conception. Think of the particularly difficult circumstances in which Mary gave birth. Think of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, born out of fear, due to the threat to Jesus' life. They were and intimidated and forced into exile by Herod's edict.

As time went on things did not get any easier.

Think of the anxiety felt by Mary and Joseph at the loss of Jesus when he was just twelve years of age. Or again, think of the heartbreak that Jesus' family must have felt to hear Him ridiculed and belittled for his life-style choice. When the false accusations levelled against Jesus were bandied about, His parents must have been pained. Think of the hurt the harsh judgment to which Jesus was subjected and the distress this must have caused Mary and Joseph. Think of the fear for Jesus' mental health and well-being felt and expressed within His own family circle: Mary herself seems to have given into this fear at one point. There is an episode in which we see Mary's concerns for Jesus displayed. You will remember the scene where he came along with his brothers wanting to see Him: they came to plead with Jesus to abandon His mission and come back home.

Finally, think of what pain Mary felt to see Jesus' life end in apparent failure. How her heart must have bled to stand at the foot of the cross of her Son, seeing His whole life-work come to such a cruel end. What terrible suffering Jesus' death must have caused His mother who survived Him! No parent is ever indifferent to the suffering of their offspring. The death of a child cause a very deep wound in a parent's heart.

When we consider of all this pain and suffering, distress and difficulties, I have enumerated, our illusions about good families surely having an easy time in life begin to fall. This is no bad thing for us. You see with this realisation, so too our guilt can begin to subside that everything has not always been facile for us in the past in our own family story, just as it may still be far from easy for many of us today.

Put simply, when we consider how things panned out for the Holy Family we come to see that bad

things can happen to good people.

Perhaps this is what many of us need to grasp today above all else.

Maybe this is the insight we need to help us cope with the trials and troubles that may be befalling our own families at this very moment in time.

For, let's face it, does it not happen that we can all react a bit like those people I sometimes (often!) meet who will say to me: *Father, what did I ever do to deserve what has befallen me? Where did I go wrong that some of the things that have happened in my family have happened?*

When confronted with suffering and pain, are we not inclined to look for who or what is responsible for the ill befalling us? Not finding a ready culprit, often we end up just blaming ourselves.

The trite phrases of some '*Holy Joes*' or '*Holy Marys*' encountered along life's way do not always help us. I have heard statements such as that which was used in times past by Fr Peyton's Family Rosary Crusade by '*Holy Joes*' or '*Holy Marys*' in ways that make people feel terribly guilty around things over which they have no control and for which they are not responsible. I am thinking of Fr Peyton's slogan phrase: *The family that prays together, stays together.*

The implication is often that if only your family has prayed, no ill will betide it.

This is simply not true!

I know plenty of families in which there was much prayer and is much prayer and yet not everybody is together in those families.

There can be the breakdown of relationships in the best of families.

Even if and when relationships are maintained there can be all sorts of problems.

Good people are not given automatic dispensation from trials and difficulties. Indeed, it can appear to us at times as if *the better people are the harder they get things* in life.

I can hear quite distinctly one woman who said to me: *Father, the better you are, the worse it is!*

Quickly she added: *Although I can't see where I went wrong with the children when raising them, I must have gone wrong somewhere. Look at the mess things are in. It must be something I have done.*

Just to have something go wrong can be seen as some sort of curse.

Without denying that we can and do get things wrong along the way (at times at least) we cannot and should not blame ourselves for everything that goes wrong in our family's life, nor should we blame our family for everything that has gone wrong or is a source of struggle in our personal existence.

There is no doubt that our background will already have had and will continue to have its influence upon us. St Paul is clear: *the life and death of each one of us has its impact upon others.* That implies that the life and death of others will also have impacted us.

Our family of origin has had an influence on who and how we are today. I won't dispute that.

But, it is strange how we react in regard to our family of origin. It can go in two different ways.

Some of us want to pretend that our family was, or is, nearly perfect.

Others of us may have a tendency to avoid personal responsibility for our own actions and hang everything upon the peg of our unfortunate family experience, blaming all our ills and negative character traits on our upbringing - as if a painful experience we had of the past justifies our being unjust (at least unfair) in our dealings with others today.

Whatever the case may have been - whether our family experience was good, by and large, or whether it was, generally speaking, a bad experience - we need to claim our personal life for our self today.

Fair enough, we need to accept the reality of our experience and deal with our family upbringing and its effects upon us, upon who and how we are today, but we have to accept our part of

responsibility for what we have done with our experience, what we are doing with it.

When it comes to family influence I am led to think of a passage we find in the Book of Nehemiah. We are told in chapter 9 of the Book of Nehemiah that the returned Jewish exiles *took turns in confessing their own sins and those of their ancestors*. A reading of the wider context of the Book of Nehemiah shows us that the people at first blamed their ancestors for all the ills that they were enduring: they saw their captivity and the difficult situation they were facing as their forebears fault. *They said: Our ancestors refused to turn from their wickedness. So now we are slaves here in the land of plenty that You gave to our ancestors. And we serve conquering kings at their pleasure and are in great misery.*

Translate that as saying: *it's all everybody else's fault!*

Let us look at the implications of this for us.

Fair enough, the ills that have befallen us, the bondage we may find ourselves in today (our anger, our poor self-esteem, our difficulty to show emotions, our fear to show ourselves vulnerable, or to be loving and kind, difficulties in the area of our affective life or our sexuality ... whatever it is we are struggling with) may well involve wrongs committed by our parents and family, or simply things they got wrong without intending it. Or, our difficulties may be due our wider upbringing experience and so we could include, as having a degree of responsibility for our present situation, our educators and even the Church, at least those who presented the Church's position in a certain way etc.

It can be legitimate for us to express regret, hurt and even anger around all this. We can be sad about what was done to us, but our suffering gives us no rights to be a cause of suffering and pain to others and, even before others, to ourselves.

While we have a right to hold others accountable and to grieve over what was done to us, that is only part of the picture: our liberty also comes into play.

We cannot use others as an excuse to justify our own wrong choices, our unacceptable reactions or unjust behaviours. We cannot make others the excuse for our choice to stay bound when we could come out of bondage. Others may be responsible in part for bringing us to the place of captivity where we find ourselves, but we are responsible for moving on to a better place for ourself and those round us (and that means that we are also responsible for refusing to do so when our attitude is one of refusal). We have to learn to move on for the sake of our own life, of course, but also for the lives of others: our spouse, our children, other significant persons in our lives, our loved ones, our community, the brethren in monastic life etc.

At this point let me say that I find the words spoken by Simeon in today's gospel passage consoling. His words show us that suffering is part of life, everybody's life - even the life of holy people, even the life of just and sinless people.

Simeon foretold that a sword would pierce Mary's heart. This piercing would not be because Mary was a bad person or would go on to do anything wrong (Christian tradition calls her sinless). The piercing of Mary's soul is explained by that division we all know within us, caused by the initial wound of our fallen humanity which we call *original sin*.

What is more, Mary's suffering would certainly not be because of any wrong her Son Jesus might commit, for He was the Christ and nothing less than the incarnation of the All Holy God. *There was no sin in Him at all.*

Any/every parent knows what it is to suffer for their child.

Every parent knows the meaning of these words one day: *Your own soul will be pierced ... Your own heart will be broken.*

I would like at this stage to draw attention to the other prophetic figure we meet in today's gospel passage: Anna.

I believe Anna also has something important to say to us in the context of what we have already been talking about: the impact of the suffering, pain and injustice we have endured in our lives. Anna shows us that the ills which befall us need not be given free rein to destroy our lives; our suffering need not be allowed to poison or embitter us.

Think of Anna's own example.

This woman had a relatively short marriage: seven years only. What should have been a life-long partnership came to an early end. Anna could well have allowed bitterness to set into our heart and sour her whole life, but she did not allow this to happen.

Decades of unwanted singleness can drive many people to become embittered and/or to go in search of love in the wrong places and in the wrong ways. Not so with Anna. Instead of becoming embittered or self-indulgent, Anna turned her singleness into something positive for the Lord and for others. She used her singleness as an opportunity to serve God and to reach out to others. She did this in freedom. This is precisely what is drawn to our attention by what we read of her in today's gospel passage. In the temple serving God in prayer, Anna sees and is attentive to the young couple who come with their child. She could have felt jealous of them, but she didn't. She approaches them with a word of comfort, a word of encouragement, a word of life.

If Anna is clearly a free woman, so too are the young couple Mary and Joseph free in their attitude: Joseph was a man and Mary a woman who were *free under grace*.

They came willingly to present their first-born to the Lord.

Their gesture of offering expressed their firm belief that the child they brought before God was not their property, but God's gift of life confided to them - a gift confided for a time.

The same vision can and should be introduced into our understanding of our earthly families.

If only we all grasped that while we have been confided to one another we don't actually belong to one another! This would free us all up tremendously.

Ultimately, our belonging is to God. To know this leaves us much freer in each other's regard.

That is the point Jesus will make to His parents in that incident recorded for us later on in the gospel where we see the boy Jesus back in the temple where His parents had first consecrated Him to the Lord.

Remember Jesus' words to his distraught parents when He was twelve: *I must be about my Father's business*.

And yet, He also knew that He owed honour and obedience to Mary and Joseph and so He went down to Nazareth and was submitted to them.

Even as a boy of twelve, Jesus knew who He belonged to before all else.

He may well have been His earthly parents' son, He lived under their authority, but He knew that His Father in heaven demanded His first loyalty. His loyalty to Mary and Joseph, His humble subjection to them, was rooted in and stemmed from His knowledge that ultimately God was His Father and theirs.

Saying that, I am led to see with my mind's eye a portrait of the Holy Family which hung in my late parent's bedroom.

It depicted the boy Jesus, at about twelve, standing between Mary and Joseph. If it showed Jesus standing with His parents, His stance actually spoke of His freedom in their regard. There was freedom of movement in the picture. He looked as if He was freely walking towards the onlooker to reach out to them, leaving His parents behind. The child stood a little more to the foreground than Mary and Joseph in this artistic depiction. It looked to me as if Jesus was walking on ahead of His parents who stood still and watched Him go away from them.

But that is not all that was in the picture.

The picture also depicted the Blessed Trinity over and above - and yet with - the Holy Family. In the

image I refer to, the Father was shown to look down benevolently upon Jesus and His parents and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove was shown to be there above the child's head, as a kind of link between the Father and Himself.

Everything in this picture spoke to me of mutual respect in love.

This is what we are called to all the time.

In good times and in bad, we are called to regard one another with respect and to hold in our hearts mutual love.

At all times we are called to leave each other free to be and to let each other go when that is what is required of us.

C.S. Lewis reminds us that *Love is proved in the letting go*, in the letting be, in the letting each other be free.

St Thomas Aquinas says that *the family is where human beings learn to love*. It is - when all goes well! But things don't always go well.

That is why we are called to pray in a special way for all earthly families today. Of course, we are called to do that all the more intensely during this year of the Synod on the Family: a Synod which is trying to look, with the light of the gospel and the compassion of our God, upon those earthly families and individual persons who have been hurt and damaged in one way or another and are hoping for God's healing, reconciling grace to be displayed to them by the merciful regard of His Church - by our merciful regard.

Amen!