

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” Feast of the Holy Family -C-

1 Samuel 1: 20-22, 24-28 Psalm 84 Colossians 3: 12-21 Luke 2: 41-52

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I bet the your family's Christmas didn't reflect the traditional idyllic presentation of the Holy Family. There was a spat between the teenagers; an aunt who's always patiently instructs others how to raise their children, though she has none of her own; a brother-in-law who would rather be watching the game on tv; and a recently divorced daughter and her two children still shell shocked from the experience. If Norman Rockwell had needed models for a magazine cover of a modern holy family he certainly wouldn't have knocked on our doors! We ache too much ...argue over silly things (and some not so silly)...aren't speaking to one member in particular ...haven't forgotten a slight that happened five years ago...think there's too much salt in mom's turkey stuffing... and wish the vegetarian daughter-in-law would have stayed at home.

We weren't the holy family on Christmas day. Maybe we didn't even have a family to go home to, so we gathered with a few friends and did the best we could to cook some traditional foods that only vaguely resembled the way “mom used to make it.” Were we a holy family with our rushed grace and not so holy thoughts? Yes, we were. Not because we had our religious act together, not because the day went perfectly, but because God has been born among us, into a human family with all its complications and ambiguities—the holy mess.

We still gather in families to eat a special meal, celebrate the events of this season --- as best we can. And God is born again in our humanity, setting about to heal us and to help us come together to reach our true destiny, our everlasting home with God. All this, as we pass the potatoes, offer a toast to one another's health, and tonight and the days to come, wish each other a happy new year.

A sober look at the Gospel for today will help keep us from romantizing today's feast and the three people upon whom it focuses. Jesus' family has come to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Jesus has separated himself from the company of his parents and family members. There is a note of annoyance or hurt in Mary's question to Jesus, “Son, why have you done this to us?” And isn't it ironic that Jesus' first words in this Gospel should sound like reprimand to his

parents, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know...?” What an unusual statement for someone born into the extremely close knit family culture of this primitive Mediterranean world, where good family relations were of primary importance. He had decided to do something without asking his parent’s permission.

The story tells us that Jesus is twelve years old. This is the age when Jewish boys prepare for their Bar Mitzvah, when they accept their religious responsibilities and think about their life journey. He is showing signs of the independence and the compulsion for God that will characterize his adult life. But his parents have no way of knowing what form his later call will take. All they know is that he had separated himself from them. This trip to Jerusalem prefigures much. Jesus will not follow the usual path into his father’s line of work. He will not, as would have been expected, stay in his home town among his own kinsfolk. He is already showing signs of a vision that has begun to form in his imagination. He is engaged in discussion with the teachers prefiguring his own teaching role later in his life. He is in the Temple and he himself will become the sacrifice in the new Temple built by the Spirit.

This moment in Jerusalem prefigures Jesus’ later journey there with his disciples, his new family. Then he will reveal more about himself. His parents do not understand now what he is saying to them about the priority of his relationship to God, which takes precedence even over his relationship to them. Jesus’ later life will reveal that being in his family had nothing to do with blood but with faith in him. Mary is showing the signs of a true believer as she “kept all these things in her heart.” When the shepherds came at the birth of Jesus and told his parents what they had heard from the angels about God’s graciousness to humanity through the newborn, Mary didn’t understand. Again Luke tells us, as he does today, she kept these things in her heart. She doesn’t understand how God’s plan will be worked out in Jesus, so she does what we disciples must also do, she ponders and waits.

Understanding the consequences of Jesus’ birth into our human family isn’t easy: wasn’t for those who lived with him then, isn’t for us now. As a family of faith, we need to ask: what are the consequences of professing that we are the followers of Jesus Christ? This story in the Temple comes at the end of Luke’s introductory two chapters. While Mary and Joseph don’t get a completely clear response from

Jesus, they do hang in there, they do stay around to see the implications for their lives. And so must we, as we profess our faith these days in the newborn Savior. In subsequent weeks we will hear the stories of the adult Christ who will invite others to become a part of his family. Flawed though we be, we will want to hear and ponder his words and actions and determine the consequences for our own lives. As did his parents, we will stay around as well, and continue, like Mary, to keep all this in our hearts.

The grace in the story is that Jesus stays in there as well. He doesn't throw up his hands and find another set of parents, ones who understand perfectly. He stays with us too, even when we don't get it. We will be hearing more stories from Luke this liturgical year, stories of people who are constantly missing the point. And Jesus stays with them through it all. These are our stories, the story of the Church. We just don't or can't understand, but the grace is that we are not abandoned. We have done things in our lives based on what we thought we should do, and we found we misinterpreted the clues. The Good News is that we were not abandoned, we did not fail the ultimate test. Our God has stayed with us and is helping us, even now, learn more about what it means to accept the implications of the Incarnation in our lives.

When I was younger there was a tendency to use this feast as an occasion to show what the model family should look like. The preaching was on the "holy Christian family" resembling the family of the three holy members. No matter how good my family was, it never quite measured up to the description of the holy family from the pulpit. But look at the reading about this family. What makes them holy? The family went each year to worship at the temple for Passover. Their lives focused on God. But all wasn't peace and tranquility. Even amid the pressures that our culture puts on family life, we too struggle to focus on God, we too struggle to make this pilgrimage each Sunday to the table of the Lord where God sees our hungers and gives plenty of good food to hold this faith family together. There will, for sure, be families present at this Eucharist with their own unique divisions and struggles. We might pray for them when we offer petitions, and be sure to include children who have run away from home or for wherever there have been ruptures in the family fabric.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER:

THE LIVING PULPIT, July-September, 1999. This whole edition was on the

theme of family and has articles, quotations, book suggestions, scriptural studies, etc. that relate to this theme. This publication is an excellent preacher's resource. For subscriptions call: 1-800-447-9004. Check their webpage: <http://www.PULPIT.ORG>

QUOTABLE:

Throughout the gospels, Jesus confronts a society rigidly divided by an intricate code that separates the clean and the unclean, the righteous and the sinner, the insider and the outsider. In everything he says and does, Jesus turns that society upside down, breaking down the codes that divide God's family, restoring the broken and excluded to wholeness and community, inviting those outside to a place of special honor in the feast that God has prepared. This accounts for the scandal that constantly attends Jesus and his fellowship with "prostitutes", sinners, unclean people—unclean in both the literal as well as ritual sense of the term. The "family" that Jesus gathers around him is hardly what we would call an "exclusive club", instead, it includes every type of "wrong" person, every type of person who feels marginalized and excluded by the prevailing standards of social value. It is these people, in particular, who experience the call to join Jesus' family as a genuine blessing.

—Robert Ellsberg in, THE LIVING PULPIT, July-September, 1999, page 4.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes)

pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com