

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 am in an airport lounge waiting for a flight and I am surrounded by families. It is holiday time and families are on the move. There are parents traveling with their children and all kinds of family combinations----one, two, three or more children---with one or two parents. There are grandparents too, helping parents get through the complexities of traveling with children amid the crowds, formalities and rush. And there is lots of conversation, pleas, whining, bargaining, and laughing. Some of the smallest are entertaining us spectators.

But traveling is a strain and children aren't as restrained as we adults; they make their discomfort known. So, parents are doing what parents do they: remind their children about good manners; instruct one child to share with another; feed the little ones; provide coloring books and crayons for diversion. Some children don't need these distractions, they are being entertained by video games and cartoons. The modern family here in our first world is traveling. Like families on the move anywhere in the world, the parents have lots of work to do. In particular, they never let their children, even the teenagers, wander from view. That's their job as parents, it's in the "job description" —feeding, protecting, training, supervising; in other words, loving their offspring. Even on holiday, when the family is away from home and their accustomed surroundings and routine, the family dynamics continue to play themselves out. These families around me in the airport today may be on holiday, but it doesn't look like a holiday for the parents and grandparents.

If we compare our families today with the Holy Family, no doubt we will come up short. We will feel separated from Jesus, Mary and Joseph, not only by two thousand years, but by our humanness—we don't feel very holy. The families I am observing may not be officially called "holy" in our calendar of saints; but there's a lot of everyday holiness going on around me as they spend a lot of energy to be a family together. They are trying their best, it seems to me, to live and travel together---loving one another by being patient and forgiving and trying to fulfill their roles and responsibilities as children, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The gospel today tells us that the Holy Family was also traveling. And things weren't always as serene for them as our statues and holy cards depict. Today is a good example: there was confusion, consternation, anxiety and even misunderstanding--- "Did you not know...?" —the son replies to his parents. In addition, from its very beginning the family faced: a hint of scandal about the pregnancy; flight for their safety; poverty and violent threats. Like many modern families they suffered under political and military oppression, had to settle far from their original home and had to start a new life in a foreign place. Two thousand years may separate the modern family from the "Holy Family," but there is much to link us, much that we share.

Today's scriptures speak about being in God's house and being children of God. There are a lot of family references: Samuel is part of a devout family; John tells us that we are already ("now") God's children and Jesus is both part of a human family, as well as belonging in his "Father's house." The response to the first reading proclaims blessed those who dwell in God's house. The Alleluia verse before the gospel, suggests how we children can continue to dwell in God's house, for it prays, "Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your son." The scriptures speak in physical and spiritual terms: God's house for Samuel and Jesus, is the Temple in Jerusalem. But we come to learn, through Jesus' preaching, that baptism incorporates us into God's family and brings the life of Christ in us. Through baptism we are in a new family of brothers and sisters. In the second reading, John reminds us that through the Spirit Jesus dwells in us and so we no longer need to go to a physical "house of God," a singular place to find God, for God is in each of us, each of us is a "house of God." We are part of God's people and form a holy family together, with God as our dwelling place.

Jesus and his parents were not traveling by modern forms of transportation, as we in the airport today are. They had not booked seats together in the same row as modern, careful parents do today. No, this family isn't in our culture or in our time. It is middle eastern and is two thousand years removed from us. They would have traveled with friends and extended family in a kind of caravan. Jesus was of an age when he would have traveled with the men, so, at first, Mary would not have been concerned. But Joseph must have thought Jesus was still staying close to his mother and her female relatives. Perhaps that is why they went so long without noticing that he was missing. But when they do realize, they are obviously distraught. Imagine their panic.

Jesus' parents were observing the Passover "festival custom." Like Samuel's parents, they were devout and so they took Jesus to Jerusalem to observe the feast. Luke tells us that Jesus was twelve, the age a young Jewish male begins to take on adult religious obligations. But, as families often experience, Jesus' parents have an adjustment to make as they prepare to see their son go from boyhood to manhood.

We are already seeing signs of what Jesus will be asking later in the gospel of his disciples. As important as family and village life were to middle eastern people in Jesus' time, he would require of his disciples another loyalty and new a commitment. Following Jesus involves accepting a whole new set of relationships that goes beyond kin and next door neighbor. In the kingdom he would proclaim, those who heard his voice and responded to it would be asked to leave family behind and enter a new and different kind of community of sisters and brothers—not of blood and biological ties, but a spiritual union with one another in Christ. The Alleluia verse before today's gospel is appropriate for us, Jesus' new family: "Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your son."

Love of God calls Jesus' disciples into a new family, the church. So, at this stage of his life, Jesus is beginning to show the break he himself will have to make because of his relationship to God. He will return with his parents to Nazareth and be obedient to them; but the time will come when he will separate from his family so as to do what God required of him.

Our sanctuaries still have Nativity scenes, we are in the period of Christmas, but today's story of Jesus in the temple reminds us our faith in the Incarnation does not stop at the crib. The gospel already has hints that Jesus' disciples will be asked to make a break with the past and accept a new life of sacrifice. We cherish our families and, if we were fortunate to have had loving parents and good relationships with our siblings, we are grateful. But just as Jesus is beginning to show signs of entering a larger world and responding to its needs, so too must we move out of the confines of the safe and serene and enter and respond to the areas of need that the world presents to us.

We thought we were celebrating a warm feast right after Christmas. We thought the afterglow of the Nativity would continue to stir up memories of childhood Christmases from the past and extend the "silent night, holy night" feeling into the new year. Instead, Jesus, emerging from childhood to adulthood, reminds us that in

his name, we must be about his project—even at the cost of personal preferences and family loyalties.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Wallace, James A. **PREACHING TO THE HUNGERS OF THE HEART: THE HOMILY ON THE FEASTS AND WITHIN THE RITES.** Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002.

Wallace first reviews the history of the homily since Vatican II. He concludes that preaching today needs to address three spiritual hungers: the hungers for wholeness, meaning and belonging. Then he shows how the preacher can address these hungers through the great feasts of the Lord, the sacramental rites and the celebrations of the saints—with specific attention to the feasts of Mary. He includes examples from his own preaching.

QUOTABLE

“In our own day, Walter Burghardt, S.J., who has been promoting the preaching of social justice in his workshops on “preaching the Just Word,” has also addressed in a very astute and pastorally sensitive manner this question of raising controversial issues noting both the limits and the resources needed to address such areas of conflict. I would summarize his insights in the following way. First, the pulpit is not the place to *resolve* complex issues in areas such as the economy, welfare, health-care insurance, capital punishment, or military intervention. But it is the place to *raise* these issues in order to bring them to the consciousness of the community, insofar as such issues relate to their identity as God’s people sent into the world to bring about God’s justice. Second, preaching that makes an effort to raise consciousness must be characterized by competency, compassion, and conviction. Competency involves knowing the issues, not as the ultimate authority but as one who has done some “homework” and as one who has drawn on the expertise of others. Compassion is at the heart of all preaching whose end is to touch the heart. The preacher’s care, concern, and abiding love for the people must be evident in word and deed. Finally, the preacher’s conviction is rooted in the preachers’ own conversion. People want to see in our lives the convictions we speak.”

—James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R., in “New Theology Review,” February 1997, p.25.

JUSTICE NOTES

The Church hears the suffering cry of all who are uprooted from their own land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home anywhere. She senses the anguish of those without rights, without any security, at the mercy of every kind of exploitation, and she supports them in their unhappiness. [We are called to work] so that every person's dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family which knows how to appreciate with discernment the different cultures which comprise it.

-Pope John Paul II *Message for World Migration Day 2000*

...Recalling this great bishop, (Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, bishop and patron of immigrants) my thoughts go to those who are far from their homeland and often also from their families; I hope that they will always meet receptive friends and hearts on their path who are capable of supporting them in the difficulties of every day.

-Pope Benedict XVI Vatican City, June 5, 2005

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about

them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

James E. Thomas #0404386 (On death row since 2/24/95)

Tony M. Sidden #0368820 (3/15/95)

Charles P. Bond #0036850 (3/24/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

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"First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C." Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

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Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,

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