

Holy Family – December 31, 2017

- Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. The Gospel reading bears this out as one of the few accounts of events in Jesus's early life with his parents, Mary and Joseph.
- Holy Family Sunday is when we hear these Gospel stories in the readings, about the flight into Egypt, Jesus getting lost in the Temple, or today's reading about Jesus's presentation in the Temple.
- We think of the Holy Family as being composed of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Those of us who are of a certain age and went to Catholic schools will remember being instructed to write "JMJ" at the top of our written work as a dedication of sorts.
- Today's feast is an occasion for thinking about not only the family formed by Jesus and his parents, but also more broadly about his coming into the world within a family and the holiness of family itself.
- The first reading prompts this perspective with its account of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. The miracle of their family reminds us there was a precursor to the Holy Family.
- When the Lord takes Abraham outside to look at the night sky, he uses it to illustrate how numerous Abraham's descendants would be: "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you able to ...".
- Who of us has not tried to count the stars on a warm summer night, and given up as the sky moves above us, constantly bringing more stars into view.
- This image of a starry sky linked to Abraham's descendants conveys the immensity of humanity, and yet our own individual insignificance at the same time.
- It also conveys one of the core notions of family: continuity from one person to the next, from one generation to the next; continuity born of shared lives in the most intimate of settings.
- We look at the night sky and see pretty much what our ancestors saw and probably share many of the same thoughts and sensations.
- Indeed, the miracle in this story is that Abraham and Sarah's family does not end with them. Something of themselves is passed down to their descendants.
- And of course family trees work in two directions. You can trace descendants or you can trace ancestors. And when you trace the ancestors, you start to see how many we all have in common.
- I recently learned that about two-thirds of the millions of Canadians of French origin can trace their ancestry back to the 800 "filles du Roi" who were sent to Canada in the 17th century to marry Canadian men.

- And so, one of Abraham's descendants is Mary, and from her, Jesus.
- Which brings us back to the Holy Family, constituted by Jesus, Mary and Joseph.
- Joseph, we are told, was not Jesus's biological father. Yet, there he is in today's gospel as Jesus's father, performing his patriarchal duties in bringing his son to the Temple to be presented to God.
- This is also the first sign that God is part of this family too. Simeon and Anna recognize Jesus as the Christ, and foretell his future to Mary, the sword that will pierce her soul.
- Two things stand out for me in this story.
- First, the family includes both God and Joseph. We have moved on from the Old Testament notion of biological parentage to recognize a new kind of parentage.
- Parentage that springs from love and spirit and is just as capable of binding people together as bloodlines.
- But if this is something implicit for 2,000 years in the gospels, it is also something that is still not fully recognized.
- Although adoptive families are well accepted, we are witnessing a newer sort of family these days.
- But I have to admit that I am still a little surprised when I learn that two of my work colleagues of the same gender have become parents, or when one of my cousins marries someone of the same gender and has a child.
- But I rejoice in learning these things, and in meeting the children of these unions because it is the only way to come to an understanding of what family truly is.
- That the unconditional love it creates can come into existence in many different ways
- And that leads to the second aspect of the gospel story that stands out for me. Mary's motherhood was as real as any that ever existed.
- Her pangs of sorrow at Jesus's death echo the pain she must have felt at his birth.
- We always see Mary clearly at Jesus's birth, but she was there too at his death and shared his suffering profoundly as the one person who could feel it as no other.
- Jesus as the child of Mary and Joseph completes God's incarnation as one of us, making him part of something we call family, something that touches the lives of all of us in every way imaginable.

JMK