

**Homily - Feast of the Holy Family "B" –
St. Monica's: December 28, 2014**

Genesis 15:1-6,21:1-7: *Abraham and Sarah receive the promise of numerous descendants: in Isaac, the promise is fulfilled.*

Psalm 105: *The Lord remembers his covenant forever.*

Hebrews 11:8-19: *The faith of Abraham and Sarah: from barrenness to fertility, from death to life.*

Luke 2:22-40 – *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple: the elders Simeon and Anna recognize Jesus as the Christ.*

Christmas, we are told, is a family time. And even where the religious significance of Christmas has been forgotten or reduced to something marginal, it remains the central family feast of the year. It is a time not only to give gifts, but for families to come together, to reconcile differences, to take some time out from their busy lives to share the gift of each other's presence.

That's the theory. But our **experience** of Christmas - and of family - is very much a mixed bag. For many, Christmas is a time of great joy and festivity; for others, it is a time of disappointment, of painful realization that one's family life does not live up to the image of what a "happy family" should be. Perhaps it's that dull ache of the first Christmas after the death of a beloved family member ... the pain of a divorce or separation ... the stress of illness or financial difficulties... or just being far away, whether physically or emotionally, from one's family. Christmas puts us in touch with both the deepest possibilities and hopes for our families, and with the challenge of overcoming the obstacles and healing the wounds which seem to prevent us from fulfilling this potential, for living this hope.

Although my own particular vocation was not to marriage, or to founding a family of my own, as I grow older, I gain a deeper sense of my need – and The need of the Church, and the world – for the particular gifts which healthy, happy families bring. In celebrating the feast of the Holy Family, we celebrate the manifestation of God's love in one particular human family: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. At the same time, we celebrate the gift of all human families: all who choose to live together in covenant, knit together by bonds of love, faithfulness, and commitment.

In our readings today, we hear of Abraham and Sarah: a couple advanced in age, desperately desiring a child of their own. (Their situation reflects a widespread contemporary reality: the aching desire of parents who would love to have a child, but cannot conceive.) Abraham and Sarah had left the comforts of home and people in hope of a fresh start, a future to which, they believed, God had summoned them. But after a lifetime of wandering and searching for a new homeland, they were childless. There seemed to be no future for their family. But as the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us today, they believed in God's promise: they put their faith in God, and eventually, their prayer was heard. Their son Isaac, the fulfillment of that promise, would be the first in a long line of patriarchs and prophets of Israel: to whom Jesus himself traced (through Joseph) his human ancestry.

Then in the Gospel, we meet another pair of elderly people, Simeon and Anna. Although advanced in age, their physical vision dimmed, they are guided by the Spirit: in the busy, bustling temple, they are the only ones who notice and welcome the shy couple, bringing their firstborn son for the first time to the Temple. Anxious to do what the Law of Moses required, they present themselves for the customary rituals of purification and sacrifice: but most importantly, the young couple, isolated from family and friends at this key time, are blessed by these two prophetic strangers who recognize their Son for who he really is: God's Messiah, the long-awaited fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Israel. Secure in this knowledge, Mary and Joseph can return home to Nazareth, where we are told that "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God."

The family of Mary and Joseph becomes the place where Jesus is formed and prepared to embrace the great mission that the Father has prepared for him. Through their love and care, through their guidance and discipline, Jesus grows up "in strength and wisdom, in divine and human favour." Yet Jesus will always remain something of a mystery to them: he belongs to their family, but in a powerful and unique way, Jesus belongs first and foremost to God. As he will tell them 12 years later, when they find him again in the Temple, "I must be about my Father's business": the work of his heavenly Father's kingdom.

Mary and Joseph will have to let go. Jesus has just been loaned to them for a time. They will have to allow Jesus to leave home and follow his own vocation – his dream, his destiny, his mission. And is this not true, in an analogous way, for all parents with regard to their children? They go their own way. They begin to form their own opinions, their own judgments, their own values. They leave home. They move away – sometimes far away. They marry and have children of their own – or sometimes, they do not. Sometimes, tragically, they die before we do. (15 years!) And in each case, there is a further letting go. Ultimately, parents give their children two gifts: roots and wings. They let go, trusting that they will find their own way – without forgetting where they came from, remembering that they always have a home.

We often find it hard to relate to the Holy Family. We tend to put them up on a pedestal: perfect, holy, but somehow remote and unapproachable. Cardboard cutouts, dressed in brown and blue, hands folded, haloes securely in place. And yet, apart from a few extraordinary occurrences in their life, Mary and Joseph were people very much like you or I. They struggled with doubts, fears, questions; they had to plunge ahead in life with no guarantees, just with faith that God would somehow make it all come right in the end. As a family, they experienced poverty, danger, exile, homelessness, hard work, sickness, and death. But I am sure that they also knew laughter, togetherness, trust, affection, forgiveness, acceptance, commitment, and most of all, love.

What is more, they were people who were deeply aware of the presence of God in their lives, who sought at all times to listen to God's voice speaking in the depth of their hearts and in the events of their daily lives, and who acted upon this voice. And, this, perhaps more than anything else, is the Holy Family's great gift to us today: their God-centeredness. Their unity was not in family for family's sake, but as a way of living out the love of God who has brought them together.

We live in a time when many people struggle with their experience of family. On the one hand, it is wonderful to be with friends and family at Christmastime. Yet every family has its flaws as well as its strengths. There is no such thing as a perfect family. Families

succeed and fail – in small ways and large – in their attempts to communicate love, respect, and acceptance: both within the bounds of the family, and beyond as they reach out to others. Christmas is a time where we are aware of both the power and the fragility of our family bonds.

But isn't that why Christ came into our world 2000 years ago? Isn't that why he continues to come every year - to bring hope, healing, and comfort to those of us who, in spite of our best efforts, mess up on a regular basis? If we focus solely on our wounds and dysfunctions, on the conflicts within our families, we may lose hope. If we smooth them all over and pretend they don't exist, we end up living in a dream world and once Christmas is over, we revert to the same old patterns. But if we bring them to the Lord, who comes to us as Saviour and Healer – of individuals, families and societies – then we discover a whole new meaning for Christmas. The child in the manger becomes not just **a** Saviour, but **my** Saviour. The Holy Family becomes not just Jesus' family, but my family also: inclusive and welcoming, rooted in a God who cares for all his children, who welcomes all around his table.

So as we celebrate this feast of the Holy Family, let us ask for the strength and courage of Joseph, the peaceful, patient love of Mary, and the very presence of Jesus to come into our hearts and our families. Let us open wide the doors of our community, so that those who have experienced pain, violence or rejection – whether in their families of origin, their church families, or in a cold and uncaring world – may find in our parish family a place of warmth and welcome, of security and trust. **A home.**

Prayer to the Holy Family (from Pope Francis)

Jesus, Mary and Joseph
to you, Holy Family of Nazareth,
today we turn our gaze with admiration and confidence;
in you we contemplate the beauty of communion in true love;
to you we commend our families,
so that in them marvels of grace be renewed.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
alluring school of the Gospel:
teach us to imitate your virtues
with a wise spiritual discipline,
grant us a clear vision
that recognizes the work of Providence
in the daily realities of life.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
faithful custodian of the mystery of salvation:
help us to regain an appreciation for silence,
make our families cenacles of prayer
and transform them into little domestic Churches,
renew the desire for sanctity,
sustain the noble toil of work, of education
of listening, of mutual understanding and of forgiveness.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
reawaken in our society the consciousness
of the sacred and inviolable character of the family,
an inestimable and irreplaceable good.
May every family be a place where goodness and peace are welcomed
for children and for the elderly,
for those who are sick and alone, for those who are poor and needy.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we pray to you with confidence,
we entrust ourselves to you with joy. Amen.

Preghiera di Papa Francesco alla Santa Famiglia

Gesù, Maria e Giuseppe
a voi, Santa Famiglia di Nazareth,
oggi, volgiamo lo sguardo
con ammirazione e confidenza;
in voi contempliamo la bellezza della comunione nell'amore vero;
a voi raccomandiamo tutte le nostre famiglie,
perché si rinnovino in esse le meraviglie della grazia.

Santa Famiglia di Nazareth,
scuola attraente del santo Vangelo:
insegnaci a imitare le tue virtù
con una saggia disciplina spirituale,
donaci lo sguardo limpido
che sa riconoscere l'opera della Provvidenza
nelle realtà quotidiane della vita.

Santa Famiglia di Nazareth,
custode fedele del mistero della salvezza:
fa' rinascere in noi la stima del silenzio,
rendi le nostre famiglie cenacoli di preghiera
e trasformale in piccole Chiese domestiche,
rinnova il desiderio della santità,
sostieni la nobile fatica del lavoro, dell'educazione,
dell'ascolto, della reciproca comprensione e del perdono.

Santa Famiglia di Nazareth,
ridesta nella nostra società la consapevolezza
del carattere sacro e inviolabile della famiglia,
bene inestimabile e insostituibile.
Ogni famiglia sia dimora accogliente di bontà e di pace
per i bambini e per gli anziani,
per chi è malato e solo,
per chi è povero e bisognoso.

Gesù, Maria e Giuseppe
voi con fiducia preghiamo, a voi con gioia ci affidiamo.
Amen.