

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH

Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

Jesus' future is foretold in the Temple. He grows up in the care of Mary and Joseph. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

REFLECTION 1:

TELLING THE STORY

I remember as a student at Clonliffe how I, along with other students, used spend a week or so of the summer break at Sunshine House, the holiday home run by St. Vincent de Paul for children of the inner city of Dublin. Before lights out at night-time we used to read or tell stories to the children. They all loved a good story – there was no TV in those days, only comics and films. Stories are so important to us that one writer has even dared to say that 'God made humans because God loves stories'. Each one of us is a story all of our own – a story that God loves to listen to as if he was saying to us, 'Go on, tell me more'.

Luke, the author of today's Gospel is one of the great storytellers of all time. We can place ourselves in the narrative, identify with the characters and make them our own. Christmas is the most beloved story ever told. It's the story of a God who loves each one of us so much that he leaves the heavens and 'pitches his tent among us'. It's the story of how this same God enters fully into our world and from that moment on, dwells among us, dines with us, rejoices with us, bleeds with us, triumphs with us. In today's Gospel, Luke takes the story of the birth of Jesus to another level. He introduces Jesus to the community and the whole spiritual family that his parents are part of – the Jewish community and the whole spiritual family of which we form part. Simeon, the representative of the entire history of Jewish faith, takes the child Jesus into his arms, turns to Mary and says to her, 'You yourself a sword shall pierce'. No more angels now or shepherds awe struck with wonder and amazement. Even the serenity of the manger is just a memory. Instead a note of darkness enters the story.

The primary symbol of who Jesus is and what he will bring to the world is now introduced – a sword, ouch! That sword represents the decision that each of us has to make in writing the story of our own

lives. Jesus' hope and plea is that we will use this sword in the most positive of ways – as an instrument that will cut through to the very heart of our humanity so we can be liberated from the slavery of destructive patterns of living. The sword that is Jesus' own life of love, gives us the ability to bring into our lives a degree of freedom, the freedom to live out those graces that Paul outlines for us in his letter to the Colossians; 'heartfelt compassion, kindness humility, gentleness and patience'.

Our life is a story that God delights in reading and we ask ourselves the question, 'How will yours and mine read?'

REFLECTION 2: THE BONDS OF FAMILY

The story is told about a mother who lost her soldier son, the news of his passing being relayed by dispatch from the War Office. He had died they said, nobly at the head of his regiment. The mother wasn't really consoled. 'If only I could see him again,' she prayed...if only for 5 minutes, - just to see him.' An angel heard her prayer. 'For 5 minutes,' said the angel, 'you will see him.' 'Quick, quick,' said the mother, her tears turning to joy. 'Yes,' said the angel, 'but think a little. He was a grown man when killed in battle and there are 30 years to choose. How would you like to see him?' For a moment the mother paused and wondered. The angel continued, 'would you see him at his post, brave in the face of enemy fire? Would you see him again, as on that day at school when he stepped forward to receive the challenge cup, amid the cheering crowds?' At that, the mother's face lit up. The angel continued, 'Would you see him as a baby to whom you had just given birth?'

After a while, the mother began slowly, 'No, I would see him for 5 minutes as he was one day when he ran from the garden to ask my forgiveness for having done something wrong. He was so small and so unhappy then, and tears were making tracks down his face through garden dust. He flew into my arms with such force that he hurt me.' So, the one thing the mother wished above all was to recapture that moment when her son needed her. There is nothing more moving in life than to hear another say, 'I need you, and I cannot do without you.'

I believe that this story points to the essence, to the heart of what we celebrate on two levels today – the gift of the human family at the centre of our shared needs, shared sorrows, shared joys and our shared hopes; and the gift of the Holy Family, where all those needs and hopes, joys and sorrows have been addressed with a love beyond all telling.

God could have chosen many ways to communicate the gift of salvation, but he chose to do it through the bonds of family. God as family, often called Trinity, was chosen to relate to human beings in the manner of a parent – God the Father, as a sibling - God the Son, and as a driving life-force - God the Holy Spirit.

That divine family brought about the human family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. This family has in turn, inspired human families through the centuries. In their care for one another, despite difficulties and struggle, the Holy Family remains the measure for families everywhere. These families in turn have the potential for becoming a world-wide family of persons bonded, not by genes or vows but by faith.

By virtue of our birth into the faith family of Jesus, we will find ourselves connected and committed to others. These connections are not a matter of choice; there we are privileged to see the small, tear-faced streaks of the vulnerable, as brothers and sisters.