Sermon for 1st of Christmas Year C

Readings: Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17

Today is the Feast of the Holy Family in Catholic churches throughout the world. It is not an idea that the Protestant churches tend to note very highly, even in the Christmas season, but there might be some things we could usefully borrow from our Catholic brothers and sisters, so let us look a little closer and add a bit of our own scriptural insight too.

Even in the Catholic Church, the Feast of the Holy Family is a relatively recent event. The tradition of venerating Mary, Joseph and Jesus as the Holy Family was made popular by St. Francis de Laval in the 17th century. He was bishop of Quebec, living from 1623 to 1708. He was made a Saint only in 2014 by Pope Francis, his namesake. The Feast of the Holy Family was instituted as a feast day for all Catholics in 1893.

The basic idea is that the Holy Family can serve as an example to all Christian families. As Pope Benedict said in his homily in 2009, the shepherds who went to see the child proclaimed by the angels did not see baby Jesus alone, but met a small family.

The little family was a family of 3 – and serves as an icon for the Holy Trinity – for the family was brought into being and sustained through love – so too is the mystery of the Godhead sustained in love.

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Today’s Gospel reading is of that same little family travelling to the temple in Jerusalem. From this we gather that the family were truly pious, and the knowledge of and passion for the scriptures displayed by Jesus came from the instruction and the example of Mary and Joseph.

Families, not schools, are the primary agent of education in young children’s lives.

Family life lays the foundational attitudes that will either promote or frustrate the later efforts of school teachers. Does the child have the self-esteem to engage in society, or is the child so bullied and cowed or neglected that the child is unable to relate healthily with others?

Does the child display consideration for others, an enquiring mind, an assumption that books and knowledge are good things, that thinking is fun, that imagination is there to be used, that pain or weakness can be safely expressed, that care is both a right and a duty, that no one exists just for themselves?

These things are learnt in the family from infancy. It is terribly difficult to instil them later outside the home if some other, shakier foundations have already been put in place.

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Let us now add a little Methodist, Protestant insight to this Gospel passage.

Firstly, we note that Luke was a gentile and was writing for a gentile audience. He knew that the Graeco-Roman world would expect a story from a famous person’s childhood that would prefigure the character of the later adult. Luke, unlike the other Jewish Gospel writers, includes this story for this purpose. It was assumed in the ancient world that personality was set at birth and never changed.

The boy Jesus, therefore, was expected to be as passionate and knowledgeable about God as he was to be as an adult. This was the way people thought in those days.

The second thing to note is that Jesus has become a man. He is no longer acting like his mother’s little boy.

In the pre-adult years, a boy would be raised predominantly in his mother’s company. She would take the lead in many of the educational tasks, from toilet training to basic schooling.

When a boy left his mother’s world, he retained a close emotional bond for the rest of his life with his mother. As we noted in the sermon for 4th in Advent, it was only in the role of mother that a woman could hope to exercise authority over grown men. In all other relationships with men, women were subservient, unless from an elevated social class. So it is highly illuminating to see how Jesus speaks to Mary.

Allowing his family to set off home without him would bring shame on both Mary and Joseph. It would suggest to the rest of the travellers that Mary was a bad mother who didn’t care about her children and that Joseph was a bad father because he couldn’t control his family.

Eventually, they found him in the temple – on the third day. For a frantic, awful time, as far as they were concerned, Jesus might be dead. He could have been the victim of crime or in trouble with the Roman legionaries; but on the third day they received him back again – very much alive. Luke doesn’t tell us it was the third day for nothing. The reader is meant to take note.

When Mary asks, quite reasonably we would suppose, why he has done this to them, Jesus replies without a hint of remorse. He adopts a superior role to that of his mother, questioning **her** lack of understanding.

Jesus has become a man and taken on the traditional male role. But more than this, Jesus is displaying the same sort of superiority to Joseph too. But should we be surprised? After all, he has just demonstrated his remarkable knowledge of the scriptures to the wisest experts in the nation. Has he not shown his superiority to them also?

We see other examples of Jesus speaking “down” to his mother – as a superior would to an inferior – at the wedding feast in Cana – when he says, “You must not tell me what to do,” as the GNB translates John 2:4.

Or again in Mark 3:31-35 when Jesus is told his mother and brothers and sisters have arrived to collect him, he says, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? He looked at the people sitting round him and said, “Look! Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does what God wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother.”

Since even adult sons were expected to respect their mother and father, Jesus is breaking convention in the way he speaks here to both his parents and at Cana in Galilee, to his mother. Luke is trying to tell us that Jesus is no ordinary son. As God’s Son, proclaimed by the angels and worshipped by the shepherds, Jesus does not have the normal relationship to Joseph and Mary, as people would expect of a son.

Yet again, Luke is telling the reader that Jesus was always the Son of God, whose sense of identity is rightfully reflected in all his relationships with others, including his closest family. Not even Mary has authority, like a normal mother, over her son. Nor does Joseph exercise the same sort of authority as a normal father.

It is in this light that we read Luke 2:51 “So Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them.”

We are supposed to read that Jesus went back and was obedient to them, but on his own terms. He was obedient to them because he chose to be so. He was a good son, after all, but not a conventional one. How could the Son of God be conventional?

Thirdly, and finally, we should notice how Jesus keeps on exceeding people’s expectations of him. Again, this was to be the characteristic of Jesus the man who walked on water, healed the sick, raised the dead and taught, not like the scribes and Sadducees, but as one with authority.

Jesus does not act like the conventional son to his parents, and neither does he act as a conventional 12 year-old visiting the temple and meeting the wisest teachers of the nation.

Perhaps the utter uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God and the uniqueness of his birth to the Virgin Mary should rule out the Holy Family as serving as a model for other Christian families to follow.

Yet Luke 2:51 tells us that even the Son of God valued and honoured and loved the family enough to submit to its authority and be nourished by its love. That should tell us all we need to know about the esteem of family life in the eyes of God.

We witness the abiding love of the Holy Family that does not break even under the gravest strains and midst the bitterest tears when we see Mary at the foot of the cross, being commended to the care of the beloved disciple.

The fact that the beloved disciple is also commended to Mary suggests that although Jesus was no conventional son, Mary was no conventional mother either.

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