

## **Holy Family (Dec. 28, 2008)**

The Holy Family! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, sometimes held up as models of what every family should be like, every family, Christian or Jewish. We must never forget that the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were not Christians. They were Jews. And as good Jewish people, living in the first century of our era, they were also a good family.

I have heard people say, “How unfair to expect us to take the Holy Family as our model – to ask us to be like them. After all look at who they were: Jesus, Son of God as well as Son of Mary. He must have been a model child. Mary, his virginal Mother, preserved from sin from her conception, and Joseph, the just man who was so careful to protect Mary when he discovered her pregnancy and knew the child was not his. They had it made. None of the problems for them that most of us have to put up with. No disobedient kids. No alcoholic or abusive spouses. No sons or daughters or husbands or wives fighting wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. Don’t tell me to look to them as models of family life.”

Well, maybe I exaggerate a bit just for the effect, but haven’t you all heard or thought something like this?

As I read the stories that Matthew and Luke have given us about this family, it seems to me that they did not have it so easy after all. There really were a lot of problems. Take that troublesome pregnancy to begin with. Matthew tells us that Joseph had to do a bit of wrestling with that one. And it took an angel in a dream to set him straight – not exactly a good beginning for a happy family life!

Then they had to take that trip to Bethlehem when Mary was about to give birth -- not an easy trip, that one! And once they arrived, no room at the inn. Mary had to have her child in a stable. No cradle for the baby, only a manger for his first bed, a place where animals came to feed. Then again, in Matthew’s version of things, the child’s life was threatened and they had to flee to Egypt. Can you imagine what that must have been like? A foreign country with a language they did not understand, customs that were strange, gods that were not their own? Immigrants in our world today could look to them for encouragement. Remember, too, what we just heard

from Luke, how Jesus stayed behind in the temple and Mary and Joseph thought that he was lost. Imagine their anguish as they searched for him and how they must have felt when he seemed to rebuke them, “Didn’t you realize that I had to be about my Father’s business.” Poor Joseph who considered himself the boy’s father probably didn’t know what he was talking about.

No, the Holy Family did not have an easy time of it. And for that reason perhaps it might be at least a little bit easier for us to look up to them as we experience our own difficulties. We can look to them for an example of how to act in times of trouble, times when we don’t know where we are going or what the next roadblock will be that gets in our way.

But there is something else that is important here. The glue that held this family together, that made it possible for them to weather stormy times, was love. It was love that got them through hazardous journeys, exile and threats to the life of the child to say nothing of the poverty of their humble life as he was growing up. It was a love that began with God the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only son; it was the love that prompted Mary to say “Yes” to the extraordinary thing God asked of her; and it was the love that prompted Joseph first to do what he could to protect his pregnant wife when he knew full well he was not the father. But he loved her, just as he would love the child that he grew to cherish as his own. The child himself would learn this love and as a man he would show that he, too, loved the world so much that he was willing to die for it. No one, as he told us, has greater love than this.

John the Evangelist in his Gospel tells us that after the Last Supper with his disciples whom he loved, Jesus told them, “Love one another as I have loved you.” As I have loved you. Jesus loved them and us to death, literally. Surely if we loved one another as Jesus loved us we, too, could all become holy families. We would not be *the* Holy Family. They actually did have some advantages over us, but we can all love one another and every family (here today) can with God’s help be a holy family. It’s something for us all to pray about and to work for. Let’s do the best we can to make more holy families. That way, this day would be a feast that not only honors Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. It would be our feast as well.

I often think of my Irish grandmother and her reaction when things

went wrong or when everything seemed to pile up and become just too much. She would often invoke the Holy Family, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” she would say. Now sometimes people were a bit scandalized by that, thinking she was swearing. But I didn’t think so. I thought she was praying. And when she would catch herself and look sheepishly around, then take a deep breath and quietly say, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” then I knew she was praying.

Our first two readings are full of appropriate advice for good family life, whether it’s Sirach telling children to take care of their elderly parents even if they should lose their minds – apparently they had problems with senility and Alzheimer’s and the abandonment of the elderly, just as we sometimes do – or Paul exhorting us to kindness, meekness, humility and patience, forgiving one another, and above all, love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. A lot of people don’t like that part that says “Wives, be submissive to your husband,” and I can understand that, given the different cultural contexts. On the other hand there is that exhortation to husbands which our text does not have today that says, “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church.” That means unto death.

One thing is certain. The scriptures are totally at odds with the decimation and demise of the family so prevalent today. We face many social problems that have to be addressed by the government, Church, and local communities, including this parish of Holy Trinity. We have to ask ourselves some hard questions. Why are family values so endangered? Who or what is responsible, and what will we – we, all of us, because we are all in this together – what will we do about it? Generally speaking, children will become good Christians and good citizens if they are brought up loved, motivated, properly disciplined, and educated by parents dedicated to religious and social values. We are all aware of today’s reality: broken homes, single parent families, child abuse, parental addictions. And the list goes on and on. At the other end of the age spectrum, it is true that caring for the elderly is not always easy, and sometimes not even possible. But our parents deserve love in their waning years. And their families have the first responsibility.

When we stop and think, we realize Jesus grew up in a closely-knit

family in a small Palestinian village. There is no doubt that he absorbed much from his parents, from the way they lived and worked and prayed. He was formed like any other child. At a given moment, Mary and Joseph could take pride in their adolescent son. They did their job well. People have to be convinced today that to embark on married life and raise a family is a grave responsibility. When the task is done well, the joys are many.

But we all know so well that there will always be difficulties. When we seem overwhelmed, maybe we could learn a lesson from my Irish grandmother; just slow down, pause for a moment, and say, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!”