

Holy Family.09

Only two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, tell us anything about our Lord's early life. Mark begins his Gospel with an adult Jesus, and John does the same except for a beginning hymn to the eternal Word of God who became human in Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore, we should suppose that what Luke and Matthew included in their Gospels about the early life of Jesus had great meaning for them. They used stories about Jesus' early life in order to share with us the meaning of Jesus' entire existence. In our day when people become famous, writers scramble to dig up as much information as they can about their early lives. Where were they born? Who were their parents? Did they have brothers and sisters? Was their family life a happy one? Where did they go to school? What incidents can anyone who knew them recall about them? These are pretty much the same questions which we can imagine Luke and Matthew asked about the Lord. Moreover, since they already knew how his life ended, on the cross, and then the first disciples' experience of him as risen, they looked at any information provided them about his early life through the perspective of that later knowledge. And they also knew that since he was the Messiah, they could see his life foreshadowed in the

texts of the Jewish scriptures which spoke of Israel's hope for delivery by a messiah.

When we look at today's Gospel about the twelve-year old Jesus in the temple, what is Luke—for this story is found only in Luke--trying to tell us about Jesus and about our faith in him? First of all, we notice Jesus' age. He is twelve, an adolescent. So Luke has jumped from the Lord's infancy to his adolescence, giving us nothing about the intervening 12 years. Now he presents Jesus as a rebellious adolescent who hurts his parents. They think he has left for home with friends in the caravan or group of people with whom they had come, but he hasn't. Their search for him takes three days. That is a long time for parents to be looking for their twelve-year old. When they finally find him, his mother says what every distraught mother would say: "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." In the scene immediately preceding this one in his Gospel when Mary and Joseph brought their baby to the temple, Luke had a man named Simeon tell Mary that a sword would one day pierce her heart so that thoughts of many hearts might be revealed. Here those words are fulfilled for the first, but not the last, time. Mary becomes the model for many mothers whose sons will make them suffer.

And Jesus' response cuts even deeper. He asserts his independence and implicitly tells his mother that God, not Joseph, is his father: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" We have to presume on the basis of Luke's own text that Mary knew that but was nevertheless accustomed to speak to Jesus as her and Joseph's child, just as adoptive parents do even though they know that they are not the child's biological parents. But the words are sharp. Her child is correcting her. He is asserting his independence of her and Joseph and reminding her of his first and foremost identity as the son of God. But they did not understand his answer, the text tells us. What to make of that? Why didn't they understand? Had their lives with him as his parents obscured his full identity? It would seem so. But now the story takes an abrupt turn. The twelve-year old goes home with them and obeys them. But his mother "kept all these things in her heart."

The story can perhaps serve as an encouragement for parents faced with rebellious adolescents. They are often wounded by their children as Mary and Joseph were. But we hope that their love will eventually bring their children around, as happened in this story.

The story also tells us who this twelve-year old is. He is extraordinary. Perhaps that is its main point. It wants to tell us that

even from his adolescence Jesus knew who he was and what he had to do. Perhaps too his parents had to be reminded of that fact. Perhaps we do too. This adolescent who could hurt his parents is the Son of God among us, sharing our lives, and now after this episode he returns to live with his parents and to obey them.

Maybe this story can teach us that the divine, the extraordinary, is intertwined so closely in Jesus' life and in our lives that we don't recognize it. For example, a mother's love is so ordinary that we expect it. That is what a mother is like, we say. On the other hand, when God in the Old Testament responds to the complaint of Israel that He has forgotten her, His response to Israel is: "Can a woman forget the child of her womb?" So God is telling us that He is like a mother who cannot forget us because we are His children. Divine love is like a mother's love. It is ordinary, but it is also divine.

So let us thank God for his maternal love for us. Let us thank God for the love of our own mothers. And let us remember that like Jesus we too are the child of the Father and must be about our Father's business even if others, even our mothers, don't understand that.