

December 31, 06

Holy Family

1. I hope you did not notice, but the baby in the crib outside the rectory did not put in an appearance until the 28th of December this year, due the forgetfulness of certain people whose names will not be mentioned. And when the baby could not be found, someone suggested that perhaps he had grown up fast and walked away. That of course would correspond to today's Gospel, for here we are only a week after the birth of the Lord and we are already looking at him as a twelve year old who is worrying his parents to death because he has disappeared in Jerusalem.

2. What did Luke intend by including this incident in his Gospel? Traditionally this story has been used to represent two different forms of Christian living. The first form was that of religious life, that is, the life of brothers and sisters and priests who leave their families in order to dedicate their lives to Christ and the Church. They are seen to be represented in this Gospel story by the twelve year when he says to his parents: "Why were you looking for me? Did you no know that I must be in my Father's house?" He means of course the temple, not his parents' home, and therefore he is

telling them that his dedication to God takes precedence over his life with them at home. The second form of Christian living, life in the family, was seen to be represented at the end of the story when Jesus leaves the temple and returns home with his family: “He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them...”

3. Today’s feast is entitled the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Therefore, the church is turning our attention to the second form of Christian living represented in this Gospel passage, that of family life. What must it have been like for these three people: Jesus, Mary and Joseph? The Gospel gives us the following information. It says of the son: He was obedient to them and advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man. Of the mother it says: “. . . and his mother kept all these things in her heart.” “What things?” we might ask. I suppose it would be all her experiences of this child. Of the father it says nothing. So the concentration is on the child and the mother, but more on the child than the mother. That should not surprise us, given our and the Gospel’s understanding of who this child is.

4. But what can this Gospel say to us today? I suppose we have to say that it speaks to us first as children. We are to model ourselves

on the child Jesus who obeyed his parents and grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and man. And so, to the young children among us, the lesson is clear: Obey your parents and try to grow in wisdom as you grow in years. If you do so, you will please both God and man. But how do we who are older children, adults, hear this Gospel? We cannot still obey our parents in the sense of letting them make our decisions for us. But the word obey comes from the Latin verb audire which means to hear or listen to someone. In that sense we adults can still obey our parents, no matter how old we are. We can listen to them. When we do so, we will understand what they need. And if we try to fill those needs, then we are practicing adult obedience to our parents.

5. Who are the beautiful people among us? Wouldn't you say that they are parents taking care of their children? Nothing arouses our hearts more than the sight of parents caring for their babies and little ones. Nothing arouses our sympathy and encouragement more than parents trying to deal lovingly but firmly with their adolescent children. And now, more than ever, we have the phenomenon of people already senior themselves taking care of their even more senior parents. Here the love is reduced to its bare bones, for caring for elderly parents very often does not offer the delight and warmth which comes caring for the young, especially

when the elderly parents are suffering from dementia. How hard it is, for example, to be faithful in visiting elderly parents in nursing homes. And yet, if we disregard the elderly, where are we as people, let alone as Christians? After all, today's second reading from the First Letter of John sums up Christian living in this simple way: "We should believe in the name of God's son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us." And so we are doing as this Gospel commands us to do when we care for our elderly parents. Indeed, we are doing what Moses commanded as well. And we are doing what human nature teaches us to do, for a society which refuses to care for its elderly, as well as for its young, is violating the voice of the human conscience and becomes an inhuman society, one in which everyone should be afraid to live, one in which we would all be afraid to grow old. But a society which cares for its young and old is a beautiful society peopled by beautiful people.

6. Jesus obeyed. He listened to his parents. Let us, old and young, do the same. If we do so, then, like the Lord, we will advance in wisdom and grace before God and man--not to mention age as well.