

Feast of the Holy Family Year C December 26, 2021.

On this Sunday, the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas, we honour the **Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph**. In honouring them, we honour all families, big and small. And in honouring all families, we honour the family of God, the Church. Both Mary and Joseph are wonderful models of faith and obedience. They were obedient to the will of God despite the fact that the will of God drew them into an incredible and unfathomable mystery. They were first-hand witnesses to the salvation of the world and to the greatest act ever known. And they both embraced this mystery and accepted it in faith. But most especially, we focus in on the hidden, day-to-day life of the Holy Family of Nazareth. What was it like to live day in and day out in the household of St. Joseph? What was it like to have Jesus for a son, Mary as a wife and mother, and Joseph as a father and husband? Their home would have certainly been a sacred place and a dwelling of true peace and unity. The family home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph would have been, in numerous ways, just like any other home. They would have talked together, had fun, disagreed, worked, eaten, dealt with problems, and encountered everything else that makes up daily family life. Of course, the virtues of Jesus and Mary were perfect, and St. Joseph was a truly “just man.” Therefore, the overriding characteristic of their home would have been love. But with that said, their family would not have been exempt from daily toil, hurt and challenges that face most families. For example, they would have encountered the death of loved ones, St. Joseph most likely passed away prior to Jesus’ public ministry. They would have encountered misunderstanding and gossip from others. Our Blessed Mother, for example, was found with child out of wedlock. This would have been a topic of discussion among many acquaintances for sure. They would have had to fulfill all daily chores, earn a living, put food on the table, attend gatherings of family and friends and the like. They would have lived normal family life in every way.

The story Luke hands on to us in this Sunday’s gospel reading (2:41-52) about Boy Jesus staying behind in the Temple reminds us that the relationship Jesus had with Mary and Joseph had to be transformed. **He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favour before God and man.** (Luke 2:51–52). This is significant because it reveals God’s love for family life. The Father allowed His Divine Son to live this life and, as a result, elevated family life to a place within the Trinity. The holiness of the Holy Family reveals to us that every family is invited to share in God’s divine life and to encounter ordinary daily life with grace and virtue. Some families are strong in virtue, some struggle with basic communication. Some are faithful day in and day out, some are broken and deeply wounded. No matter the case, know that God wants to enter more deeply into our family life just as it is right now. He desires to give us strength and virtue to live as the Holy Family.

December 26 is also the day Philomena and I took the marriage vow 49 years ago, (1972), promised to be always faithful to each other until death, and to start a family. We immigrated from warm Hong Kong and landed in Vancouver, Canada on a cold winter day on November 24, 1974. We settled in Alberta, first living in Edmonton for less than a year, then Calgary for 12 years where our son and daughter were born, and in Fort McMurray since 1987. For the past 49 years we had a lot of ups and downs. But praise the Lord, our faith in Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the Holy Family of Nazareth, give us courage and strength to survive after each fall.

The first reading from 1 Samuel (1:20-22, 24-28) tells an old story of Samuel, the prophetic leader who anointed David as king. Despite similarities between this story and the

story told by Luke, a family going up to Jerusalem, a child's destiny foreshadowed – there are significant differences. The Old Testament story is a legend that serves as an introduction to a collection of historical traditions in which Samuel plays a key role. If we recognize the hand of God in Samuel's young life of service in the temple, it does not come about through his own choice, but through that of his devout mother. Luke's story is closer to our common human experience – Mary has to come to terms with intimations of a decision that will lead Jesus to leave home to take up the life of a wanderer, carrying out the mission that will shape his life - and will ultimately lead to his death. She begins to know the 'sword' Simeon foretold would 'pierce her soul'.

Jesus, as the liturgy of Christmas Day has reminded us, is **'the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, come into the world to make the Father known.'** He grew up as a dutiful son of his human parents; but as he 'grew in wisdom' - through his contact with the faith traditions of his people - he knew in the mysterious depths of his human experience the call to identify with the great mission that had brought him into the world: 'Why are you looking for me? **Did you not know that I must give myself to my Father's affairs?**' Bringing us this brief narrative, Luke intimates what lies ahead. His gospel narrative moves towards its climax when Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem to meet his fate. Ultimately, it is 'after three days' that he is restored to his disciples as their Risen Lord.

As the bonds that unite parent and child mature, they are both blessed. In the background of Luke's story, we recognize the ongoing fidelity of Mary, as she came to accept and identify with the response of her Son, as the first of all his disciples. The second reading from the first letter of John chimes in with our reflections upon the shared life of the Holy Family. In the end, the mission of Jesus was to open the way to our sharing in his risen life, sharing all things with the Father – sharing in the family life of God, as it were. The choices he made, in the freedom he shares with us, can inspire us to make our life choices, knowing that each of us has a unique place in the Father's loving plan. *For me and Philomena, 49 years is a long time, will be half a century next year. Some friends may ask about our marriage: Is there anything more beautiful in life than a boy and a girl clasping clean hands and pure hearts in the path of marriage? Can there be anything more beautiful than young love?" My the answer will be: Yes there is a more beautiful thing. It is an old man and an old woman finishing their life's journey together on that path. Their hands are rough, but still can hold hands; their faces are wrinkled but still radiant; their hearts are physically bowed and tired, but still strong with love and devotion for God and for one another. Yes there is a more beautiful thing than young love — Old love.* ♥♥👪👪

Lord, we surrender ourselves to You this day and in doing so we offer You our family. We offer every relationship, be it good or difficult, and we offer every challenge we face. Dear Lord, with Mary and Joseph, you have lived within a family; teach us always to appreciate the precious gift of being part of a family. Show us ever new ways to protect and comfort those closest to us, and let us, each day, do something that will say "I love you" without speaking the words. And let us see your image within each person in our own family, and in our greater family, knowing that in your Kingdom, we will truly be one family, united by your sacrifice on the cross. Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing. Make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer. Amen.