

Sermon Feast of the Holy Family Year C 2019

When I was about four or five I had the experience of being lost. It is still quite vivid in my memory. My mum and her sister had gone grocery shopping in the town where I grew up. Too young for school I was of course part of the expedition. I mustn't have liked going grocery shopping much then, as now, so Mum agreed to let me stay in the pet shop and look at the animals while she went off. But after a while, my interest in them started to wane. So, I went off looking for Mum. I wandered around the supermarket for a while but I had no luck. I must have then become quite distressed and was found by some shop assistant and taken to the front of the store. I remember standing on a counter with some woman making an announcement over the supermarket PA system. Fortunately, I had an older cousin who was working that same day at the supermarket and she looked after me for a bit. Eventually mum did come back. She tells the story of how she had finished the shopping and was unloading it into the car when she remembered she had forgotten me. She raced back and all was well. She too has not forgotten the story.

It's a human, little incident, not remarkable in itself and maybe you have similar stories from your own childhood, or that of your children. The experience of being lost, or misplaced is not at all that uncommon. And these little human experiences refreshingly find such ready echoes in the Gospel we encounter today. Our lives *do* in fact find echoes in the Gospel. So often we approach the Scriptures in some kind of detached, aseptic way – kept at arm's length. But if we dare allow the text of Sacred Scripture - and the gospels in particular - to speak on their own terms, we find that we cannot really remain remote and isolated from them. Our lives, - yes, *our* lives - intersect with these ancient stories. We can encounter these stories and - despite differences in time, language culture – and find that our own lives can be read into them.

The story placed before us today for this Feast of the Holy Family, the gospel writer Luke structures this story to form a bridge between Jesus' infancy and his adult ministry. It's a bit of a rude shock though! Just a few days ago we were celebrating his birth!

And now we have before us no longer the passive infant but someone on the threshold of adolescence; someone now beginning to grasp and to shape his adult identity. As is so often the case in adolescence the process involves pain for his family. Even the holy family is not spared the growing pains Jesus must, *yes, must* experience as the *truly human* Son of God. Like an iceberg breaking off from the Antarctic continent – noisy and turbulent and with painful separation – so too for the young Jesus. He - as all young adults - begin to grow into themselves experience the noise, pain, turbulence of distancing, breaking off, and separating from a complete dependence on parents and family.

As dutiful children of Israel - faithful and obedient to the law - Mary and Joseph go up to Jerusalem each year for Passover. At twelve the Jewish male leaves behind childhood and assumes the responsibility of adulthood, so this is an important occasion for Jesus. To prove the point, though (to show that there is marked shift, a continental break from the past) Jesus *does not* return to his hometown with the rest of the party but secretly stays behind in Jerusalem, to the great anxiety of Mary and Joseph. Just keep in the back of your mind the magnetic pull Jerusalem is already exerting over the young Jesus. Now he celebrates his first Passover. The next time Luke brings us to Jerusalem, Jesus will be on the back of a donkey to celebrate his last Passover. The shadow of the cross looms large even here, as a boy...

When the family are reunited, we see that the change, the break, has already occurred. Parents are often befuddled at the strange language teenagers speak: grunts, groans and one syllable answers. But really the same thing is going on here in the Gospel. Jesus and his parents now find themselves speaking a different language. We see this firstly in Jesus' response. From his perspective, of course, he's not lost, but in the most obvious place of all! '*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know I must be about my father's business?*' And secondly, the growing gap highlighted in the different ways in which mother and son are using the word 'father'. '*Your father and I*' on Mary's lips refers of course to Joseph. But the *father's business* for Jesus means of course, his heavenly Father.

Imagine for a moment poor Joseph standing in the background. It must have seemed like a punch in the guts. He's risked an awful lot, maybe even everything to standby, to support, love Mary and the son that is not is....

The tension and awkwardness of the moment here show that the Holy Family is perhaps not so different from most other families, especially the mixed families which are the reality of our world today. The image of the Holy Family, then, is an *important reminder* for us all that some unconventional and challenging relationships can still be vehicles of grace and of God's presence. Mary, Joseph and Jesus would have been (and are!) part of those unconventional and challenging relationships. In asserting a very narrow definition of what is right and normal, the church hasn't always allowed searching hearts to find God. The Holy Family invites us to see that God works even in our sometimes complex and less than clear relationships. And that God works in the very ordinariness of our lives. At times we might see the Holy Family as completely saccharine or sentimental. Or so other in their holiness. And so we keep their example at arm's length: unrelatable or unattainable.

But the struggle of Mary and Joseph to work out exactly what is going on is completely ordinary. Jesus breaking away to become his own man is completely ordinary. The tension and tense dynamics in the relationships between Mary and Jesus and we could well imagine Joseph and Jesus is completely ordinary. Still, the Holy Family do indeed have a unique vocation, a very special role in the plan of salvation. And this is an assurance for us all: that in the complexities and ambiguities of our relationships and of all our lives, in the growing pains, in the separations and losses, in our ordinariness God's divine hand is still at work. We might not understand it, as surely the case for Mary and Joseph. Its fulfilment may still be a long way off, as for Jesus. Our task is to let God be God and to co-operate with his plan even if we don't fully understand it. Amen.