

Holy Family

Year C



FIRST READING
1 Samuel 1:20–22, 24–28

PSALM
Psalm 84:2–3, 5–6, 9–10

SECOND READING
1 John 3:1–2, 21–24

GOSPEL
Luke 2:41–52

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PRAYER

Psalm 84:2–3, 5–6, 9–10

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
Happy are those
who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.
Happy are those
whose strength is in you,
in whose heart
are the highways to Zion.
O LORD God of hosts,
hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

READING THE WORD

First Reading

1 Samuel 1:20–22, 24–28

In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the Lord.”
The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she

said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.”

When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.” She left him there for the Lord.

Second Reading

1 John 3:1–2, 21–24

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Gospel

Luke 2:41–52

Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all

who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

HEARING THE WORD

"Preparing God's Servants"

The Feast of the Holy Family takes us a step away from the stories of birth, and into the field of the child's growth and development. The readings of the day focus on the role of the parents and guardians in moulding a young life for the service of God and God's people.

The first reading comes from the opening chapter of the book of Samuel which narrates the circumstances surrounding the birth of Samuel. The story begins with a family in severe distress. Hannah, one of the two wives of a man called Elkanah, is unable to conceive, and suffers from taunts and humiliation from the second wife, Peninnah. Seeking divine help, Hannah goes to the sanctuary at Shiloh where she pours out her heart before God and his priest Eli. She also makes an oath, pledging the child to God's service, if her barrenness is removed.

God's response exceeded all Hannah's expectations. Not only was she given a son, but her son, Samuel, went on to become one of the most significant Israelite leaders in history.

Hannah played an essential role in preparing Samuel for his future role. She certainly took good care of his physical needs, weaning him probably in his third or fourth year. More importantly, she put her son on the right path in life. First, she ensured that Samuel became a Nazirite to God. Nazirites in Israel were the people consecrated and devoted completely to God's service. By living a strict, pure and devout life, they were a sign and reminder to the rest of the Israelite community of its identity as God's holy nation. Hannah prepared her son to become just such an individual. By bringing her young child to the sanctuary and leaving him there, Hannah made a great sacrifice as a mother. He was her only son and God's gift to her. Still, this woman of faith did not hold her son back. She allowed him to leave the family and serve in God's sanctuary, where he later received the call for his mission. This child would go on to become a judge, a prophet and a priest who shaped his people's future by rescuing them from the Philistines and anointing their first kings. At the beginning of Samuel's splendid career stands a visionary mother who has the foresight and courage to selflessly let her child go and serve his God and his people.

The second reading from the first letter of John focuses on a different family. Here we find God's family consisting of God as the Father and believers as "children of God". This family is bound together by God's immense love, and the promise of an even closer union with the Father. The author describes this family beautifully in the words, "see what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; ... when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." Bound to God by such love, and such hope, believers can only marvel at God's grace that brought them into his family.

But this family faces threats. Believers live in a world which neither knows or recognizes the Father. Consequently, his children are also exposed to the damaging effects of enmity and ignorance, coming from those who view their union with the Father and their lifestyle as odd and intolerable. As a good mentor, the author of the letter advises this community on how to withstand the world's enmity. He writes to them about faith and love. Faith in Jesus ensures their continuing and unbreakable union with the Heavenly Father. Love for one another builds strong ties among believers. Faith and love are really two sides of a single commandment concerned with maintaining community relationships intact amid the hostile world. By insisting on faith and love, the author prepares God's children in

this world for future life in the heavenly world.

The Holy Family in the Gospel story faces its own challenges, as Jesus goes missing. The family was on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Importantly, Jesus was twelve years old at the time. In Judaism, this was the age when Jewish boys passed from adolescence into adulthood. An adolescent boy, upon reaching the age of twelve, became Bar Mitzvah, which means “the Son of the Law”. This meant that from then on he was bound to follow the law of Moses, observing all religious prescriptions and commandments laid out in that law. One of the obligations was participation in the most important Jewish feasts – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles – which at that time were celebrated only in the Jerusalem Temple. Bringing Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus’ parents were fulfilling their spiritual obligations and giving Jesus his first chance to fulfil his ancestral law as an adult man.

However, Luke narrated this story with the central focus on Jesus’ divine sonship and commitment to the mission for which he came into the world. Jesus remained in the Temple and separated himself from his earthly parents because he understood the Temple as his true Father’s house. In that house, Jesus debated with the teachers of the law because he was already concerned with leading his people to the right understanding of God’s ways. Already at this

early age, he appears to be aware that Jerusalem would be the focal point for his entire mission. He will spend his last days on earth teaching in the Temple.

The role of Jesus’ parents was a difficult one, as Mary’s bitter words of reproach addressed to Jesus demonstrate. However, it was his parents who had taught Jesus to observe Jewish ways. They brought him to Jerusalem, giving him his first chance to experience the place where the most important events of his earthly life would unfold. After finding Jesus, Mary appears to have accepted her son’s completed dedication to God with thoughtful faith, as she “treasured all these things in her heart”. Eventually, Jesus would leave his parents and set out to accomplish his mission. But the episode in the Temple shows that his parents prepared him with education, freedom and an environment where he could grow in wisdom and grace, preparing him for the mission that was set out for him by the Father.

The feast of the Holy Family highlights the role of parents and guardians in laying sound foundations for God’s servants and emissaries in the world. Hannah stands as an example of a selfless mother who prepared and handed her son over to God. The Apostle John instructs his Christians on the ways to remain in God’s family and preserve their unique identity as God’s children amid a hostile world. Mary and Joseph are torn between their parental concern, and real-

ization that Jesus’ mission in the world goes far beyond the concerns of their ordinary family. In all these stories, we see parents and guardians facing difficult situations and choices. But they were capable of acting with generosity and faith, meeting the great challenge of preparing those entrusted to them for their future service to God. In their stories we hear an echo of the psalmist’s words, “my soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord”.

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

It is not uncommon to read in the newspapers or hear from others that a man has beaten his wife, or a wife has treated her husband in a very painful manner. Divorce and broken homes are on the increase, they are truly a scourge of our modern time. For a moment take a look at your own family (particularly the extended family), and you would most likely observe that there is at least one person in the family whose marriage is tilting or has all together collapsed. We live in a world where parental responsibility towards children has diminished considerably and we are increasingly witnessing an attitude of disrespect for parents. Many so-called Christian families are on the rocks. In the face of such heart-breaking family experiences, the Church sets before us the Holy Family as a model.

Some parents had hoped to raise up gentlemen and

ladies in their families, but they ended up “rearing” monsters in their homes, and they feel threatened by their own children. There is a painful truth expressed by our ancestors in the proverb, “a crab does not give birth to a bird”. It proves that the parents’ example and the way of life has a great impact on the children. The home is where children are first formed.

Hannah was instrumental in the formative years of Samuel and led him into the service of the Lord. Mary and Joseph also fulfilled their tasks of raising up the boy Jesus on godly principles. As an upright man, Joseph ensured that his family observed the religious practices of his people. Each year, he would lead his family to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover. Like Joseph, husbands and fathers are called upon to be models of holiness for their families. It is wholesome when men call their families to prayer and lead exemplary holy lives.

For Mary, we are told that she, “treasured all these things in her heart”. Like Mary, wives and mothers are called upon to be the heartbeat of the family, prayerfully pondering over the unfolding events in the various chapters of family life.

Pope John Paul II in the concluding part of the document, “Familiaris Consortio” (“The Christian Family in the Modern World), states, “The future of humanity passes by way of the family. It is therefore indispensable and

urgent that every person of good will should endeavour to save and foster the values and requirements of the family.”

The fate of any nation to a very large extent depends on the kind of characters that families in that nation produce. When we destroy our families, we destroy our nations, and when we destroy our nations, we destroy our world. Similarly, when we build our families, we build our nations, and when we build our nations, we build our world.

Today’s feast calls our attention to one of the essential tasks of our Church community in the modern world – shaping the families and guiding the growth of young people. Like the biblical characters of today’s liturgy, all people of faith are called to be parents. This parenthood is not necessarily a biological one, but one of serving as exemplars and models of a God-fearing life that can change the face of the world through shaping its future generations.

PROVERB

*“A crab
does not
give birth
to a bird.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

In reflecting on the parenting that I have had, I thank the Lord for what was good in it and identify what was missing. Where can I find the guidance I might not have received from my parents?

What impact do I make on the young people around me? Could it be considered the type of guidance that Hannah, Mary and Joseph offered to their children?

Response to God:

I reflect on how God has been both a Mother and Father to me in different contexts, showering his immense love upon me in unique ways.

Response to your World:

I identify someone in my surroundings who comes from a broken home. How can I provide at least some of that parental care and guidance this person needs.

Many hearts and homes are broken. Some of them are very close to us. How can our group offer any help to those who are hurting because of lack of adequate parenting?

PRAYER

*Eternal Father,
we bring
before your throne of grace,
all marriages and families.
In your mercy,
repair what is broken
and raise what is fallen.
Grant this
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*