

Sunday, December 20, 2015      Feast of the Holy Family (A)

Conventual Mass                      Why Have You Done This To Us?

“Son, why have you done this to us?” It is too easy to idealize the Holy Family. After all, Mary was sinless, God’s fairest creation, Joseph was a righteous, holy man, known for his swift obedience to God, and Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. What could be more perfect? They seem to be so far from our experience.

The Scriptures tell us differently. Mary was pregnant with Jesus before her marriage to Joseph. There was talk of divorce and then there was the birth of Jesus in a far off less than desirable place. One day Mary would be at the foot of a cross.

Only two days ago we celebrated the entry of the Word into our human condition with liturgy, poetry and song. The images of choirs of angels, adoring shepherds, wise men from the East and a guiding star are still with us as we sing

our hymns of thanksgiving to the Father for his great gift to us.

Today's gospel leads us on our first steps to Jerusalem and the cross. Surely it also leads to the resurrection, but neither Jesus nor we arrive there without going through the cross. In one of our Advent hymns we sang: "Be seen, O God omnipotent, // Enthroned on wood of crib and tree, // Be foremost now in sacrifice, // Surrendered, slay iniquity.//"

The sweetness of the manger stands always in the shadow of the cross.

The Holy Family had its difficulties and tensions, as evidenced by today's gospel. Mary and Joseph lost their child and spent three anxious days looking for him. They had no news of his whereabouts. Amazed, they found him in the temple with the learned doctors of the Law. Mary's reprimand shows how pained and anxious she and Joseph were: "Son, why have you done this to us?"

Jesus' blunt and seemingly unfeeling remark surprises us: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house? (Or as another translation has it 'my Father's business')."

A missionary I once heard, felt that this was an expression of the teenage Jesus' rebellion. He was making a definite statement of what he was all about. It was not a sinful rebellion. He who was always obedient to Mary and Joseph was now showing a prior obedience, obedience to his heavenly Father, one that would characterize his whole life. It would lead him unflinchingly to his passion and cross, an obedience he had learned at the feet of Mary and Joseph. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word."

We understand that he who came forth from the Father would obey the Father's will. What surprises us is his answer bordering on rudeness. Mary and Joseph had lived in agony for three days. Could he not have let them know

somehow that he was detained and for good reason? When teaching teenagers, I learned that the synapses in a teenager's brain are not completely connected which explains some of their behavior and forgetfulness. Let us not forget that Jesus was totally human as well as divine and at this age that means a 'totally human teenager.'

I remember an incident from my own teenage years. My parents were to be at a school function and I had neglected to tell them. At supper, the evening before the event, I casually mentioned it. To my mother's annoyed, "Why didn't you tell us?" I replied, "I didn't think you were interested." The look my mother shot me was priceless.

There are other levels of meaning in St. Luke's story. First of all, we notice in Jesus' reply a distancing from his parents. He is totally dedicated to God separating himself from all else, even the ties of relationship. The will of God is paramount as it must be in Jesus' disciples. When during the ministry he was to assume, someone would tell him that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him. He replied "Whoever does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mathew 12:50). On another occasion he said "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). The gospels were not meant to be a biography but to preach the Good News which includes the cost of discipleship.

Other scenes in this story foreshadow what was to come. The three day search for the child Jesus evoke the three days Jesus spent in the tomb. His mother's distressed "Son, why have you done this to us?" parallels that anguished cry on the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" His birth, his ministry, the cross, the resurrection, all were done in obedience to God. The famous hymn in Philippians 2 begins; "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God something to be grasped at, but empties himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men." This, of course, is what we are celebrating these days. The hymn continues "he humbled himself and became obedient even unto death even death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every other name..." (Phil. 2:6,7-9). What is important for us, is that St. Paul introduces this hymn with the words "Have this mind in you, which was in

Christ Jesus” (Phil.2:5). We are to follow in Christ’s footsteps with God’s will as our priority.

What in Jesus seemed at first glance like disobedience to his parents was in reality an expression of his obedience to his heavenly Father. We too may be called to obey God against the norms of our culture and sometimes even laws. Witness the martyrs, a St. Agnes, or a St. Thomas More, who gave their lives in obedience to God in opposition to civil laws. Even now Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere are being executed for their obedience to God. In the nineteenth century Christians opposed the government by smuggling run-away slaves to freedom in Canada.<sup>i</sup> Normally, however, our obedience is shown in the little things that make up our everyday life, the hidden things in which God is present to us.

After this episode showing Jesus’ obedience to God, he returned to his normal life of obedience to Mary and Joseph. Hans Urs von Balthasar reflecting on this story wrote: “God

and obedience to him stands at the center of this family and constitutes the glue that holds it together, creating a bond tighter than the physical bond between the Mother and the Son” (Light of the Word – Reflections on Holy Family Sunday, Year C).<sup>ii</sup> May we as families and individual follow in the footsteps of the Holy Family.

<sup>i</sup> <http://stmaryvalleybloom.org/homilyforholyfamily12.html>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://stmaryvalleybloom.org/homilyforholyfamily 12.html](http://stmaryvalleybloom.org/homilyforholyfamily%2012.html)