

# Holy Family, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

26 December, 2021

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** 1 Samuel 1:20-22,24-28

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 84:2-3,5-6,9-10

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** 1 John 3:1-2,21-24

**Gospel** Luke 2:41-52

Family is a common theme in the Christmas movies which have been so ubiquitous for the past couple of months. Broadly speaking, this theme takes two main forms. There is the creation of family; often in its traditional boy-meets-girl romantic form, but also now-a-days in less traditional forms like adoption narratives, blending families, or even the discovery of “found” families. The second form is the reconciliation of family; ranging from the return of the black sheep to the healing of far more complexly divided extended families. Both of these forms are about families coming together, and thus these movies can be seen as object lessons for the kinds of family gatherings that we so desire to have in our own houses.

One would think, therefore, that on the Feast of the Holy Family, we would have scripture readings that likewise celebrate the coming together of family. Now, that theme is not absent, but the far more salient motif is the healthy division of families. In the first reading, Hannah, having born a son in answer to her prayers, leaves the young Samuel to be raised at the Tabernacle Tent in Shilo. In the Gospel, Jesus steps out from under the care of his earthly parents, without telling them, drawn to spend time in the Temple and in a way begin to come to terms with his earthly mission. Both are stories about a young boy leaving home for the first time, beginning the process of severing their connection with the family of their birth so that their life can grow beyond those circumstances to encompass a bigger destiny.

While this theme probably resonates most strongly with those of you who are empty nesters, parents who have seen their own children step out on their own to take on their own lives, it’s important for us all to recall that family isn’t just about coming together, but also about letting go. As much as we might want to keep our loved ones close, when we cling to them we end up stifling them. We put our emotional needs above theirs and treat them as objects which exist to keep us happy. True love, however, is about putting others first: to want what is best for them rather than what serves our own needs. When the time is right, and this is not easy to discern, we must let go of those we love so that they may continue to grow.

Hannah is, if anything, too eager to let go. We’re told that she leaves Samuel at the Tabernacle Tent after he was weaned. That means he was probably around 3 years old but may have been as young as 2 or as old as 5. To her, this makes sense as she is merely returning to God what he so generously gifted to her, but I can only imagine how hard that was. To give up the child she so

longed for to be raised by another. To only see him a few times a year, maybe even only once a year, when she and her husband made the pilgrimage to the Tabernacle Tent to offer the sacrifices required by the great Jewish festivals. But it is because she lets go that Samuel grows up in the service of the LORD. It is because she lets go that he is present in the Tabernacle Tent on that fateful night when he hears God's voice calling his name for the first time. It is because she lets go that Samuel would go on to become the last, and in some sense greatest, judge over Israel that history would know. Still, one has to wonder if perhaps Samuel might not have benefited from a few more years under his mother's care. After all, when he himself becomes a father, his relationship with his sons echoes that of Eli, his foster father, with his sons, which is to say it isn't very good. His sons, like Eli's, prove to be incompetent and corrupt. We can never know if Hannah's care for her boy might have led to him being a better father, but it does make you wonder.

Mary and Joseph, on the other hand, might be described as a bit clingy and self-centered. During their stay in Jerusalem for Passover, did they not notice Jesus's fascination with the Temple? Were they perhaps a bit caught up in their own needs and festival duties that they simply assumed Jesus was with them, that he thought as they did, that his needs were identical to their's? How else do you explain them not thinking anything of that fact that he wasn't walking with them as they left? They were leaving, so of course Jesus was leaving too, he just had to be with one of their neighbors or relatives in the caravan. It's only when they reach the first night's rest stop that they are disabused of this notion after what must have been an increasingly frantic search amongst the caravan. Come morning, having questioned everyone in the caravan, probably two or three times each, they had no choice but to return to Jerusalem and hope to find him amongst the crowds of that busy city. The worry and near panic that must have been going through their minds for those three days. But then, when they find him: "Son, why have you done this *to us*?" Not, "Are you all right?" or even "Where have you been?" But a self-centered question that focuses on how Jesus's actions have affected them. They cling to their child, unwilling to let him go to live his life. It is Jesus who is understanding, who puts his needs aside and accompanies his parents back to Nazareth where he remains for another couple of decades before finally stepping out to begin his preaching career.

Family relationships are difficult to get right, and parent-child ones are perhaps the most difficult of all. If we fail to hold on when our family members need our support, if a parent isn't willing to discipline their child so as to prepare them to become moral people, then can we really call ourselves a family? Are we not rather a bunch of people living in parallel whose lives simply happen to be playing out in the same space? At the same time, if we fail to let go, to give others a chance to fail and grow from the failure, then these family members aren't really other people to us, but merely props in our life-story. Finding the balance, the middle-way between these two extremes, is hard. Our readings today show us that not even the heroes of the bible got it right all the time, but the familial bonds that come out of it are worth it. Indeed, they are an image, imperfect as they are, of the bond that God forges with each one of us. For the Holy Family that we celebrate today isn't just Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. It is the family of God the Father, of Jesus his Son, of each of us adopted to be sons and daughters united with him and with each other into the one Holy Family of God.