

THE “HOLY” FAMILY

The quotation marks are there, not to imply that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were not truly a holy family, but to invite you to consider what holiness really means because, too often I suspect, we incorrectly equate holiness with perfection and imperfection with sin. But in fact, imperfection is simply part and parcel of being human, and the members of the Holy Family were indeed human – and holy as well.

So let’s consider some of the gospel stories of Advent-Christmastime that describe the lives of this particular Holy Family..... The Annunciation is the first; and although it’s conveniently celebrated too literally on March 25, we hear it on the Immaculate Conception as well. What happens in that scriptural moment? Gabriel announces to Mary that she has already conceived a child, but Mary **questions** that possibility because she has had “no relations with a man.” The angel provides the answer – it’s the work of the Holy Spirit – and Mary accepts it graciously. Then we have Joseph’s stories, the first when he learns of Mary’s pregnancy and decides to “**divorce** her quietly.” But then, he too has an angelic visit – in a dream – and decides to put aside his fear and take Mary as his wife. Then later, when Jesus is still an infant, Joseph is awakened by another angelic dream and told to flee with his family to Egypt. Really?!

But back to the Bethlehem journey which must have been strenuous, to say the least, for a very pregnant Mary and a foot-sore Joseph. When they finally arrive, adding insult to injury, they’re turned away from the inns in town and relegated to a drafty cave where Jesus comes into this world surrounded by farm animals. To make matters worse, a contingent of unwashed strangers – the shepherds – come to visit and gawk at the holy family who likely wanted nothing more than to rest and be left alone. Fast-forward then (in Luke’s Gospel) to the story we won’t hear again until next year: the finding of Jesus in the temple. Jesus is portrayed as a typically thoughtless pre-teen who, although he perhaps had good reason to be in his “father’s house”, failed to consider the “**great anxiety**” Mary and Joseph felt in searching for their missing son. Having been found, he returns with them to Nazareth and “was obedient” to them.

Now, I don’t think that any of those stories of the Holy Family describe what we would consider a perfect life. But there’s another lovely – and quirky – little legend of the Holy Family told in a medieval Christmas carol called *When Joseph Was An Old Man* that definitely pushes the envelope on what holiness might mean. It tells of the elderly Joseph who marries Mary, “the Queen of Galilee”, it recounts their journey to Bethlehem. Along the way, Mary asks Joseph to gather cherries for her and, being tired (and old), he refuses and tells her to “ask the father of the baby to gather cherries for thee.” At this point, the unborn Jesus “speaks up” and tells the cherry tree to bow down to his mother. Joseph, aghast and penitent, asks the unborn child to tell him when his “birthday shall be.” Jesus reveals his upcoming birthday and they continue on their journey to Bethlehem, with Joseph still tired, but Mary no longer hungry.

Of course, that song is pure legend (and there are many other medieval carols in the same, somewhat irreverent vein) but it, and the stories we find in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, say a great deal about how our ancestors in the faith saw the “holy” family – not in terms of “perfection” as we might define it, but rather in terms of their acceptance, trust and perseverance, all of which are revealed both in scripture and in legend. And that’s really what *holiness* is all about: **accepting** whatever life sends us while **trusting** in the God who is always with us and **persevering** in spite of doubt or failure. If holiness equaled perfection, we would all be up the proverbial creek without a paddle. But all of our families – immediate or extended, parish or civic – can aspire to and achieve holiness if we simply strive to live lives of acceptance, trust and perseverance – just like Jesus, Mary and our patron, St. Joseph.

Happy Holy Family Sunday...Happy – and Holy – New Year!

Fr. Bob