

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Year C

26 December 2021



Collect

O God, who were pleased to give us
the shining example of the Holy Family,
graciously grant that we may imitate them
in practising the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity,
and so, in the joy of your house,
delight one day in eternal rewards.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

With many away for summer holidays or relaxing at home in holiday spirit, it's fair to say that the Feast of the Holy Family isn't high on their agenda. To add to that, in years when there's no Sunday between Christmas Day and New Year's Day the observance is relegated to a weekday.

There are other reasons why the feast may not fire the Catholic imagination. It's a late arrival in the liturgical calendar, inserted not by a groundswell of popular devotion but by papal decree. Alarmed at seeing Catholic family life under siege, Pope Leo XII responded by inaugurating the feast in 1893. Since then the tide of change in all that concerns family life has only grown stronger.

The tension between ideal and reality is evident in Pope Francis' lengthy exhortation, *On Love in the Family*, published after the

2014-15 Synod on the Family. In #32 he writes, "Faithful to Christ's teaching we look to the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows." A little earlier, in #30, he had noted that the Holy Family was not spared the human condition: "Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares."

It may not be holiday reading, but there's much wisdom, love, inspiration and food for thought in Francis' pastoral rumination.

A reading from the first book of Samuel

1:20–22, 24–28

Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son, and called him Samuel 'since' she said 'I asked the Lord for him.'

When a year had gone by, the husband Elkanah went up again with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfil his vow. Hannah, however, did not go up, having said to her husband, 'Not before the child is weaned. Then I will bring him and present him before the Lord and he shall stay there for ever.'

When she had weaned him, she took him up with her together with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the temple of the Lord at Shiloh; and the child was with them. They slaughtered the bull and the child's mother came to Eli. She said, 'If you please, my lord. As you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the Lord. This is the child I prayed for, and the Lord granted me what I asked him. Now I make him over to the Lord for the whole of his life. He is made over to the Lord.'

There she left him, for the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 83:2–3, 5–6, 9–10

R. How happy they who dwell in your house,
O Lord.

How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord, God of hosts.

My soul is longing and yearning,
is yearning for the courts of the Lord.
My heart and my soul ring out their joy
to God, the living God. **R.**

They are happy, who dwell in your house,
for ever singing your praise.

They are happy, whose strength is in you;
they walk with ever growing strength. **R.**

O Lord, God of hosts, hear my prayer,
give ear, O God of Jacob.

Turn your eyes, O God, our shield,
look on the face of your anointed. **R.**

First Reading

Stories of childless women giving birth to a son after pleading for divine help are scattered in the Bible from Genesis to the gospels. Abraham's wife, Sarah, for example, was blessed with Isaac, while John the Baptist was born to Zechariah's wife Elizabeth. Samuel's mother Hannah is one of these devout women.

The two books named after him tell of Samuel's role in a crucial period of Israel's history, the transition from the charismatic leadership of judges to the establishment of the monarchy under Saul and David. Today's reading plunges us without warning into the story of his birth and dedication. Hannah's prayer has borne fruit in a son whom she proceeds to offer back to God for temple service.

While Hannah's childlessness links her more directly with Elizabeth rather than Mary, there are parallels between her and Mary's stories. Both Hannah and Mary respond to God's graciousness with a canticle of praise and with the presentation of their sons to God in the temple. Today's gospel, however, is not that of the infant Jesus' presentation in the Temple but of his staying behind there as a youth.

Over and above its abrupt start, this reading presents other challenges. Much of it is concerned with ritual customs that contemporary readers and congregations may find quite foreign. In the same vein, Hannah's willingness to place her new-born in the service of God may have little appeal these days. Readers will need to prepare and proclaim this text well to enable the congregation to appreciate the drama of the story. They will also need to check the pronunciation of "Elkanah," "ephah," "Shiloh" and "Eli."

Responsorial Psalm

Today's psalm links the first reading and the gospel, both of which recount a pilgrimage to a temple. Hannah goes to Shiloh and Jesus' parents to Jerusalem. Devout Jews in the time of Jesus made three pilgrimages, for Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Psalm 83/84 is prayer of pilgrimage, perhaps for the feast of Tabernacles given the mention of autumn rains elsewhere in the psalm. It has parallels with the psalms known as the Songs of Ascent (118/119 – 133/134).

In common with many travellers, their thoughts begin to focus on their destination, in this case the temple in Jerusalem. As they anticipate the satisfaction of abiding there, they are prompted to joyful prayer. They praise the living God who gives them strength on their pilgrim way. One of the stories they remembered on their journey may well have been that of Hannah's presentation of Samuel for temple service. It certainly accords with the spirit of glad praise which pervades the first two verses of the psalm. While praying them in that spirit, readers will need to deliver the first verse carefully to ensure they proclaim all six lines before the congregation responds. The third and final verse is different in character. It seems to assume the pilgrims have entered the holy place and caught sight of the king, God's anointed, perhaps leading a service. They are moved to pray that God will look on him with favour. Readers should modify their tone to match this change of form.

A reading from the first letter of St John 3:1–2, 21–24

Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God's children; and that is what we are.

Because the world refused to acknowledge him, therefore it does not acknowledge us.

My dear people, we are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed, all we know is, that when it is revealed we shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is.

My dear people,
if we cannot be condemned by our own conscience, we need not be afraid in God's presence, and whatever we ask him, we shall receive, because we keep his commandments and live the kind of life that he wants.
His commandments are these:
that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we love one another as he told us to. Whoever keeps his commandments lives in God and God lives in him.
We know that he lives in us
by the Spirit that he has given us.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 2:41–52

Every year the parents of Jesus used to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up for the feast as usual. When they were on their way home after the feast, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowing it. They assumed he was with the caravan, and it was only after a day's journey that they went to look for him among their relations and acquaintances. When they failed to find him they went back to Jerusalem looking for him everywhere.

Three days later, they found him in the Temple, sitting among the doctors, listening to them, and asking them questions; and all those who heard him were astounded at his intelligence and his replies. They were overcome when they saw him, and his mother said to him, 'My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.' 'Why were you looking for me?' he replied. 'Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?' But they did not understand what he meant.

He then went down with them and came to Nazareth and lived under their authority. His mother stored up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men.

Second Reading

A fog of obscurity surrounds the three letters attributed to John. They are assumed to originate within a "Johannine Community," a collective of disciples who identified themselves with the tradition of John's gospel. The first letter, perhaps from late in the first century, is a teaching document. While it aims to correct false ideas and to reinforce the faith of the community, it isn't set out in systematic form. It's rather repetitious though simply expressed. It focusses on the divine-human person of Jesus and on the organic link between faith and Christian living.

The passage that serves as the reading for today's feast is a combination of two extracts from chapter 3 of the letter. In the first the members of the community are twice called God's children. This makes them a "holy family," though no reference is made to the Holy Family as such. The second defines faith and love as the fundamental features of the community's "family life." Members must believe in Jesus Christ and love one another as he commanded.

The reading as a whole is meditative in style. It invites prayerful reflection on the mystery of God's love for humanity and on the implications of this love for how we live. A number of the ingredients – rejection by the world, the commandment to love, life in God and God's life in us, the work of the Spirit – have parallels in Jesus' farewell words to his disciples in John 13-17.

This is a reading to be proclaimed thoughtfully, in a tone and at a pace that allows the congregation to dwell on its message. It proceeds more in circular than linear fashion. It should be a pleasure for readers to engage prayerfully with the assembly.

Gospel

The obvious gospel story to match that of Hannah and Samuel is the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple, but that's used in another year. Instead we have the final episode in Luke's account of Jesus' birth, what the Rosary calls all too briefly the "finding in the temple." From this point on we are told nothing of the life of the Holy Family. The next we hear of Jesus is his baptism in the Jordan.

Ironically today's story radically counters the conventional model of family. It may well end with reassuring statements about Jesus' obedience and growth, but his parents have been put on notice that Jesus' ultimate loyalty is to a heavenly Father. Simeon had already foreshadowed the pain that Mary would suffer as a result of Jesus' destiny.

So much of Luke's infancy narrative is a masterly blend of human interest and theological purpose, and this story is no exception. We are drawn sympathetically into the predicament that Mary and Joseph face. We can imagine ourselves joining in the anxious search for their young son. That means that we too are stung by Jesus' dismissal of their concerns and his "declaration of independence." It poses for us uncomfortable questions about our priorities. It reminds us of another of Jesus' declarations, that it's those who hear his word and keep it who are his mother and sisters and brothers.

The story is familiar but never loses its appeal. It is so well crafted that the reader should be able to retell it with freshness and vigour.

Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love,
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic Churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again
experience violence, rejection and division:
may all who have been hurt or scandalized
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
graciously hear our prayer.
Amen.

Pope Francis

(Prayer for the Synod on the Family given by Pope Francis on the Feast of the Holy Family, 2013)