

This Sunday we mark the feast of the Holy Family, in the midst of our Christmas celebrations; a time traditionally set aside in our culture for gathering of family – whether it be children away at college or universities returning home for the break, or grown children and grandchildren returning home for visits and meals and celebrations with parents and grandparents. And it is so important to celebrate these gatherings of family; to cherish these moments and raise them up as something very important in the lives of our families – particularly as the institutions of family and marriage have seen such an unprecedented attack over the past several years in our society. It is almost surreal to see how the commercial media celebrate the gathering of ‘family’ over the ‘holidays’, and at the same time downplays the traditional institutions of family as ‘outdated’ or ‘out of touch’ or unimportant.

But as Christians it is so important for us to celebrate the institution of the family. The Church refers to the family as ‘ecclesia in ecclesia’ or the ‘church within the Church’. This statement is not just a nice catch-phrase; it reflects a much deeper truth- that the very foundation of the corporate Body of Christ; the primary unit within the entire body of worship of all believers, is not the individual – but the family; that parents are indeed the first teachers of their children – not just in matters of social behaviour or motor skills – but in matters of faith; in the life of the Church. For parents, it is knowing that their example is the means by which their own children will measure their decisions in life – good or bad - as they continue to grow and develop.

It is important for us to know and celebrate this particular feast, because it reminds us that God chose the family unit as the means by which He would introduce Himself into human society and culture. God has a purpose in all things; had he wanted to, He could have picked any means by which He could have come into the world, and any way He could have participated in human life:  
He chose the family.

This Gospel passage from St. Luke recounts one of the few insights we have into the life of Jesus as a child, and one of the few episodes recorded in the life of the Holy Family, the feast we celebrate this weekend.

But even for a brief incident, there is a lot of information that we can take from this; we know that Jesus, Mary and Joseph went each year to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover; they were devout Jews and actively practiced their faith. This tells us that as parents, Joseph and Mary transmitted the practice of their faith to Jesus; that as a family they participated regularly in the customs of their religion.

This passage also tells us that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were part of a larger family group, and that with family and friends they would travel to Jerusalem for these religious pilgrimages or observances; they traveled in a caravan....a single small family doesn’t travel by caravan – they would travel alone; a caravan was a much larger group; and because the Gospel tells us that when they left Jerusalem to travel back to Nazareth, Mary and Joseph thought Jesus was somewhere else in the caravan: maybe Mary thought Jesus was traveling with the men and Joseph in one group (which would have been traditional in a caravan – after all Jesus was 12 – the time when according to tradition, a boy became a man in the eyes of the Law ) perhaps Joseph thought Jesus was traveling with other

children and the women with his mother Mary – perhaps both Mary and Joseph thought Jesus was traveling with another group of young people within the caravan:

Whatever the case, Jesus was not there: He had remained behind at the Temple, praying and speaking with the teachers and elders.

We read how it was one full day's travel from Jerusalem that Jesus' parents discover He is not in the caravan. They return to Jerusalem to look for Him. That's two days.

They spend a day looking for Him and find Him in the Temple, discussing and questioning the elders, "and all that heard him were amazed."

That's the third day.

Any parent who has experienced a child missing, even for a few minutes, knows that absolute panic, that terrible icy feeling that goes straight to the heart! And the finding of that same child usually results in a whole rush of assorted emotions and feelings – joy, anger, relief – sometimes tears, laughter, stern words...

It's easy to imagine what the feelings and response of Mary and Joseph would have been at the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple; the first words recorded in their greeting are, "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

But we don't have to be parents to understand or appreciate the feeling of Jesus being lost to us. In our own faith lives, we sometimes can experience that loss...we look at the empty pews in our churches at other times of the year and wonder where some of the members of our own parish family are. Statistics state that there are 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, and most often we have to ask, in the public forum and in the decreased participation in public worship; 'where are they?'

We have a culture that wants to deny the involvement of God in every aspect of our public life, and yet when we experience natural disasters or terrorist attacks or see widespread poverty or disease, the first question that this same culture asks is 'where is God?' "why didn't God prevent this?" "why doesn't God fix that?"

But like the Holy Family traveling from Jerusalem, it wasn't that Jesus 'left' them – the caravan left Jesus behind.

God has always been and is always present: it is not God who leaves us or our culture behind: we are the ones who sometimes leave Him behind; in our lifestyles, our interactions with others, in the way we treat our own family members; even in our own prayer lives.

And when we wish to find Him, to return to Him, to re-connect with that sense of His presence to us, where do we go?

For three days the parents of Jesus searched, and the last place they looked was the Temple. (no doubt if we were missing a teenager today, the last place we might look is in a church). The Temple – the heart of their traditional worship of God; the last place they look is the place where He is; all of their efforts in searching have been in vain; He's been at the Temple – the heart of their faith – the whole time. Mary and Joseph, after three days, found Him in the Temple – in the house of His Father – in the house of God.

In those times when we have grown cold or confused or lost in our journey with Christ, where do we look for Him? Is the Church the first or last place we go? Do we return to the Temple of our faith, the Temple of our hearts? Do we have some idea where we might encounter Him or do we want Him to be where we want/expect/demand He meet us....

It is helpful for us in our own faith lives to realize that as a family unit, Jesus, Mary and Joseph experienced that whole range of emotions and challenges within their own culture and society that we experience in ours. They lived the 'family experience'.

That's why we can gather in confidence and ask for the intercession of the Holy Family for our own families; that through their prayers, God will watch over our own families, and grant them the graces necessary to draw them closer to Himself, and keep them in His love.

And that the members of our 'extended' family of faith, all the baptized, who have lost their sense of contact with Christ, will look for Him where He has been all along – in the Father's house.