

By Father Charles Bowes

1 Samuel 20-22, 24-28

1 John 3:1-2, 21-24

Luke 2:41-52

Family is where we first face the good and the bad

When we use the word “family” today, we can be talking about all kinds of relationships: the family or household may be a single adult, or two, who bring folks home for wine and cheese and conversation, whose apartment is open and welcoming to everyone; or a family may be an elderly or newly married couple, or single parent and child or children. It may be two aunts or uncles; it may be the nuclear family of traditional description or it may be a loosely put together group of young people. The family today is the “domestic church” that gives and nurtures human life. It may also be the only place that can fully give and nurture divine life.

The family, of whatever sort, is the place we hang our memories, as did Mary: “She treasured all these things in her heart,” says Luke chapter 2. ...And that means all kinds of memories – the good and the bad. And if our treasured memories are not to become a

longing for some perfect time in the past that never was, then we need to recall those other memories as well. Sometimes we call these memories the ghost or the skeleton in the family closet. They represent the disturbing realities of family life, things that we understandably share only with our closest confidants, with those in whom we have a deep trust. I remember the Christmas after my brother’s divorce and the struggle to be welcoming and warm – and the holidays after my father’s death and the job loss of my nephew and niece and my niece’s struggle with depression. It is somehow reassuring to know that holy families have something in common with the more familiar variety. Misunderstandings, separations, anxiety levels rising, and the need for reconciliation mark the family of Jesus in circumstances that sound not unlike our own. Who has not lost sight of a child, for a few harrowing moments? Who has not greeted the found child awkwardly enough, with angry recriminations rather than shouts of joy? And what child has not met the hysteria of his or her parents with an impatient roll of the eyes? This is the only glimpse into Jesus’ childhood on record, and it is an ageless one.

But St. Luke’s gospel does not record this story for the mere sake of comparison – to give us a holiday lift or hope. The story is a foreshadowing, a forecast of the

future, a favorite device of St. Luke's literary style. It is a thumbnail sketch of the rest of the gospel. In here most of the gospel's themes are evident: journey, Passover, fidelity to Jewish observance and teaching, the prominence of the Temple, the absence of Jesus, the distress of those who love him, the three days...and the shattering question, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" The message is clear: nothing, no one can take precedence over Jesus' relationship with God. Just as many will not get it later, Jesus's parents show their confusion and dismay.

It is all these things that Mary, the perfect Christian, treasures in her heart and that we treasure, too. If we forget these hard memories – the death and resurrection – and do not understand the full truth of our past – both its glories and its brutalities, then we may not see the present accurately. We may not see the injustice that we live with here and now. We may become oblivious to the human beings that we devalue and oppress.

So, on this Solemnity of the Holy Family of Jesus of which we are so much a part, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge our own mixture of beauty and terror, of goodness and evil. This is never easy to do, and it is almost impossible to do entirely on our own. It takes a community of support in which all of us are willing to celebrate the wonders we have known and to come to terms with all that is wrong and imperfect.

The Holy Family dealt with the whole of reality. Saint Luke says that Mary treasured all these things in her heart. All these things would include not only Jesus teaching in the Temple but the anger and perplexity that she and Joseph suffered when they discovered that Jesus was not in the company of pilgrims returning

from Jerusalem. Mary was wise enough to keep not just a selective memory of happy snapshots but to ponder all the complexities of her Child's birth and upbringing.

This holy season we remember Jesus' birth because we celebrate his death and resurrection every time we gather at this table of bread and cup and book.

Someone once wrote that "a family is the place which, when you go there, they have to take you in."

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