

Sunday Message

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

THE WORD

Year B • 31 December 2023 • Psalter Week 1

WOUNDED FAMILIES

LUKE 2:22-40



I grew up in the 1970s, the eldest of five siblings on a family farm in rural Ireland. I was also lucky. My parents were hard-working and devoted to each other and to us.

I never saw them having an argument, I noticed the casual way they showed affection to each other; I experienced the unconditional love they had for my siblings and me.

In my innocence, I thought that's how most families were. Domestic violence, conflict, marriage break up, physical, sexual or substance abuse - these were outside my frame of reference because I had never encountered them.

So when, as a young priest, I came across cases of dreadful domestic abuse, I was stupefied. I quickly realised that we live in a world of non-perfect families, of people caught up in difficult domestic environments, very often not of their own making. And in the 35 years since my ordination, my own family has experienced its own share of heartbreak. I'm sure all our families have in one way or another.

So much about family life in the past was good - the stability of the family unit, the hard work and sense of duty and commitment to each other of so many parents and children.

But we know that not everything about the past was good. Think of the culture of secrecy and shame that sent young women to Mother and Baby Homes while allowing the men to escape scot-free, the crippling hangups about sex that paralysed so many, the crushing loneliness of those who were LGBTI and dared not admit it.

Think of how marriage was often understood as a legal contract rather than a love commitment; how corporal punishment was acceptable; how the husband had more rights than his wife. It was he who made the marriage proposal, sought her father's permission to marry, put a ring on her finger, symbolising she was now his and would take his name. In many countries, marital rape was protected by law.

Thankfully, the situation has improved. We are more aware today of the complexity of the human condition, that relationships and family life are not always straightforward. Even the best families have their troubles.

In his letter about marriage and the family, *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis uses three expressions that are helpful to remember today.

The first is 'wounded families.' Families are not perfect, Pope Francis stresses. Try as we might, we are not perfect. We know from hard experience that the ideal of Christian marriage

and family life is hard to live, and people fall out and relationships suffer. Pope Francis calls them "wounded families," and says we must "avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" and "be attentive to how people experience distress because of their condition."

All families are wounded, and Pope Francis says it's okay to admit it. His letter is not a simple rehash of Church teaching on marriage and sexuality. It acknowledges our broken humanity. Perfection, as individuals or as families, is impossible this side of the grave.

The second expression is 'gradualism.' Families are a work in progress, the pope says. No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; "families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love... All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse." We must always aim at being better - to grow all the time in holiness, patience, compassion, understanding, perfection. The Holy Family itself was a work in progress.

The third expression is 'field hospital.' The Church must be a field hospital that cleans and heals people's wounds. So many families are wounded - members who don't talk to each other, or who hurt each other, members who disappoint those they love, or make decisions that let them down. The family is the primary battlefield where these hurts are experienced. So the family must be the primary field hospital that cleans and heals these wounds. It means a willingness to forgive, to talk, to listen, to spend quality time together, to understand differences, to appreciate one another. Each family must be a field hospital that never allows wounds to fester. ■

REFLECT

Pope Francis sums up what families need in three words: "A big heart." That's what Jesus, Mary and Joseph had for each other. A big heart. That's what family members must have for each other. A big heart. A big heart toward a loved one whose marriage is in crisis, a big heart towards the sibling captured by addiction, a big heart toward the adolescent struggling with her sexuality or gender identity; a big heart, Francis says, even toward "those who have made a shipwreck of their lives."

A big heart kept the Holy Family together. A big heart will help sustain our families too, whatever their circumstances. ■

SAY

"Lord, help me to always treat those closest to me with love and respect. Amen."

LEARN

The feast of the Holy Family was instituted in 1921, and has been celebrated on the first Sunday after Christmas since 1969. The Holy Family is seen as the model for the human family, the religious community and the Church itself. The feast is a celebration not only of the Holy Family itself but of the ideal of the Christian family on which the Church has always placed great emphasis.



DO

Reach out to a family member with whom you may have a difficult relationship.

PRAY

Pray for families everywhere, that they may grow in holiness and love. Pray for families in distress.

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

The shepherds went in haste,
and found Mary and Joseph and the Infant
lying in a manger.

GLORIA

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

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.

FIRST READING Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3

A reading from the book of Genesis.

The word of the Lord was spoken to Abram in a vision, 'Have no fear, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great.' 'My Lord,' Abram replied 'what do you intend to give me? I go childless...' Then Abram said, 'See, you have given me no descendants; some man of my household will be my heir.' And then this word of the Lord was spoken to him, 'He shall not be your heir; your heir shall be of your own flesh and blood.' Then taking him outside he said, 'Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants' he told him. Abram put his faith in the Lord, who counted this as making him justified. The Lord dealt kindly with Sarah as he had said and did what he had promised her. So, Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the time God had promised. Abraham named the son born to him Isaac, the son to whom Sarah had given birth.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM Psalm 104:1-6, 8-9

Response:

He, the Lord, is our God. He remembers his covenant for ever.

1. Give thanks to the Lord, tell his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
O sing to him, sing his praise;
tell all his wonderful works! (R.)
2. Be proud of his holy name,
let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice.
Consider the Lord and his strength;
constantly seek his face. (R.)

3. Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, the judgements he spoke.
O children of Abraham, his servant,
O sons of the Jacob he chose. (R.)
4. He remembers his covenant for ever,
his promise for a thousand generations,
the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac. (R.)

SECOND READING Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

A reading from the letters to the Hebrews.

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and that he set out without knowing where he was going. It was equally by faith that Sarah, in spite of being past the age, was made able to conceive, because she believed that he who had made the promise would be faithful to it. Because of this, there came from one man, and one who was already as good as dead himself, more descendants than could be counted, as many as the stars of heaven or the grains of sand on the seashore.

It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He offered to sacrifice his only son even though the promises had been made to him and he had been told: *It is through Isaac that your name will be carried on.* He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!

At various times in the past
and in various different ways,
God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets;
but in our own time, the last days,
he has spoken to us through his Son. Alleluia!

GOSPEL Luke 2:22-40

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke.

(For shorter form read between ><) Lk 2:22, 39-40
>When the day came for them to be purified as laid down by the Law of Moses, the parents of Jesus took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, < – observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord: *Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord* – and also to offer in sacrifice, in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

Now in Jerusalem there was a man named Simeon. He was an upright and devout man; he looked forward to Israel's comforting and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord. Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the Law required, he took him into his arms and blessed God; and he said:

'Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace,
just as you promised.
because my eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared for all the nations to see,
a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of
your people Israel.'

As the child's father and mother stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected – and a sword will pierce your own soul too – so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.'

There was a prophetess also, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well on in years. Her days of girlhood over, she had been married for seven years before becoming a widow. She was now eighty-four years old and never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer. She came by just at that moment and began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.

>When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him <

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with
the Father;

through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,

(all bow during the next three lines)

and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the
Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored
and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church.

I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness
of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the
dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

We offer you, Lord, the sacrifice of conciliation,
humbly asking that,
through the intercession of the Virgin Mother of
God and Saint Joseph,
you may establish our families firmly in your
grace and your peace.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Our God has appeared on the earth, and lived
among us.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Bring those you refresh with this heavenly
Sacrament,
most merciful Father,
to imitate constantly the example of the Holy
Family,
so that, after the trials of this world,
we may share their company for ever.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.