

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY

Nicky Ing - 28th December 2003

1 Samuel 2:18-20,26, Psalm 111, Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2: 41-52.

Today we are celebrating the first Sunday in the Octave of Christmas....many people see this as a kind of anticlimax, a time of weariness, even, after the build-up to the Big Day, when we gathered all the family together and shared all the gifts and ate all the food! This may seem like a time when we are just regaining our strength to prepare for the New Year festivities in a few days time. But, traditionally, Christmas is a time when, as far as it is possible, families get together....many of us have been fortunate to have our families with us over Christmas, and some have had to travel great distances for this to be possible.

So, today, I would like to consider the importance of the family, in relation to the readings we have looked at.....and see what they can teach us.....

The Old Testament reading , dealing with the birth of Samuel and his consecration to God, reminds us that Samuel was a special child. Hannah saw him as a unique gift from God, a sign of God's favour to her after many years of childlessness.....and she dedicated him to the Lord...an enormous sacrifice for a mother to make...just to be able to see him once a year from such a young age. In time Samuel made his own vows of dedication to God, and went on to play a major role in the history of Israel.

Of course, every child is a gift from God...and all parents have hopes and dreams for their children....but as parents we have to learn that we can't determine the future for our children....they have to find their own way in life, and besides, God may have other plans for them which conflict with the plans that we have!!! Whilst home is a place where we can be accepted as we are, with our strengths and our weaknesses...this kind of acceptance enables us to grow as human beings and as children of God. **Letting go** and **setting free** is perhaps one of the hardest lessons that parents need to learn. Perhaps many of the conflicts in families could be avoided if parents could manage to 'let go' a little more, once the children become adult and independent.

The story of the twelve-year-old Jesus apparently 'lost' in Jerusalem shows us that misunderstandings can occur, even in the best of families. Of course, Jesus was not 'lost' ...in fact he felt fully 'at home' there, and began to discover his true identity as the Son of God. All this happened in the context of pilgrims returning from Passover...a large group of people. It would be quite likely that Jesus could disappear from the group for a day or so and that his absence would not at first be noticed.... but of course when they realised he was missing, Mary and Joseph began a frantic search for him, and had to return to the city to try and find him. To discover that a child is missing is one of the most profound fears that a parent can face. And fear is one of the elements of all human relationships. We fear loss, change, broken dreams, and we also fear the unknown....Understandably, Mary's reaction when they find Jesus in the Temple, is one of anger: **'Why have you treated us like this?'** she asks Jesus. And his response, quite straightforward...**'I did it because I must be about my Father's business'** meant that Mary had to listen carefully to his answer. Even

though she and Joseph didn't understand his explanation, they didn't scold him....if they had done so, they might have robbed him of the fruits of a marvellous experience. No, rather Mary remembered his words and pondered them in her heart. She treasured the memory of these events, trying to discern the hidden meaning behind what was happening. She listened well....as any good mother would, gently, carefully, and without hasty judgement,,,,and although the incident was a painful one for them as a family, it had the effect of bringing them all closer together. Jesus appreciated how much Mary and Joseph cared about him, so he in turn was happy to obey them, and we are told that Jesus '**increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour**'. His parents gave him the space he needed to grow to maturity...to realise his full potential.

Parents need a lot of wisdom. There are many different ways in which a child can be 'lost' and cause anxiety and sorrow to the parents. This can happen through drugs, gangs, or cults.....or a child may intentionally leave home. Or perhaps the child may be physically present but emotionally distant, or 'lost', because of family disagreements, hostile misunderstandings, and non acceptance..... silence, and lack of communication, can be one of the greatest barriers in a family. Of course it isn't just children who get 'lost'. We can lose touch with adults in our lives, through conflicts in relationship, through divorce, or even just by making critical comments, which may cause pain to others. Retirement, too, can leave us with a sense of loss.....

In fact, there is so much we can relate to in terms of loss...we can lose faith, or good health, or a belief in ourselves, or a sense of security, or peace of mind. But, like Mary, who pondered over what she had lost and then found, we also need to hold fast to the mystery of our own life and reflect on what it holds for us,,,,,,and to remember that God alone is the One who gives us guidance and direction. As we move towards a New Year which is filled with possibilities and an unknown journey for each one of us, let us ask the Holy Spirit to calm our fears, and give us a sense of perspective. May we trust in God to guide and equip us for all that we undertake, trusting that all will be well, and may we let go of any desire we may have to control or to manipulate others. In the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians which we read earlier, may we be '**Clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience....if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven us...and above all, clothe ourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony....and let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts....and be thankful**'. We ask all these things in Jesus' name.....

Amen.