

## **HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY**

**DECEMBER 30, 2012**

I love the story of Hannah and her family. In part, I love it because Hannah is a form of the name Nancy, and I have taken Hannah as a model – at least in my better days. Like so many of our Sunday readings, this reading is taken out of its context, which I think is very important; so, allow me to tell you what becomes before and after the reading we heard today. Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. Each year, for many years, Elkanah would take his whole family to the shrine at Shiloh to offer sacrifice to Yahweh. Year after year, Peninnah would chide Hannah about her being childless. Even the great love that Elkanah had for Hannah could not overcome her desolation at being childless.

Then, one year after the sacrifice had been offered, Hannah rose from the table and went to the temple to pray. There, she poured out her heart to Yahweh. She promised that if she were to conceive and deliver a male child, she would offer him to the service of Yahweh. Eli, the high priest was watching her from a distance. Hannah was so caught up in pouring out her heart to Yahweh, that he thought she was drunk. She assured him that she was not, but was incredibly sorrowful that she was childless. That is where our reading begins which recounts Hannah's offering of her son, Samuel, whom she had conceived during that year, to the service of Yahweh. When she does this, she proclaims what we have come to know as the Magnificat. Centuries later, Mary would paraphrase Hannah's word of exultation as she herself rejoiced over God's favor to her, also.

Hannah used to return every year to visit Samuel and bring him new clothes. In the meantime, she also had five more children. I often think, Be careful what you pray for! I like this story for

many reasons, but mainly, I consider it a meditation on prayer. Prayer, when we pour out our hearts to God, our sorrows, our joys, those things about which we feel guilty or ashamed, our thanksgiving, is an entrance into intimacy with God. We know from our relationships with those closest to us, that if we hide something from them because we are ashamed of what we did, or try to ignore a misunderstanding because we are embarrassed, intimacy with that person is impaired. It is the same with God. Hannah poured out her heart; so did Mary in her Magnificat; so did Jesus on the cross when he uttered; My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. That is how he felt at that moment; that is how he prayed.

As you know, the Gospels were written after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As Luke reviewed the life of Jesus, I'm sure he saw the resemblances between the story of the Holy Family of Samuel, Hannah and Elkanah and that of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Both children were conceived in a special way, both mothers rejoiced in the births of their sons and both children were dedicated to Yahweh.

The church wants us to know, though, that Jesus, although human, was also the Son of God. That is what today's Gospel reading is all about. Those who study the Gospels call this passage a "bridge". It is a bridge between the infancy narrative of Luke in which the angel tells Mary that her son will be called Son of God, and the beginning of his public life, his Baptism at which a voice from heaven proclaimed, You are my beloved Son. Linking these two events is the declaration of Jesus that He must be about his Father's business. Because he was twelve years old, he probably considered himself an adult, especially in his culture, when thirteen was the age a male could be married. He may have been puzzled as to why his parents were anxious about his absence. After this, Jesus went back with Joseph and Mary to Nazareth, was obedient to them and grew in grace and wisdom.

This is the Feast of the Holy Family. We have heard the stories of two Holy Families. What are we to make of this for our own lives? How did this family live in Nazareth? It is likely that they lived with other relatives. Joseph was a carpenter. This put the family securely in what we today would call the middle class. Jesus went to synagogue and there learned the traditions of his family. I'm sure he played with the other children. Jesus had curiosity. We know he asked questions. Let us not romanticize this family. If we do, they will be no model for our families. Even as the church teaches us the Jesus is the Son of God, let us not forget that He is also totally human. He **grew** today's reading tells us is grace and wisdom. Do you think the infant Jesus perhaps had colic? Did he keep his parents up at night? Did Mary yearn for just a little time to herself? Did Mary and Joseph ever have disagreements or misunderstandings? I can't imagine spouses or friends that don't. Were they puzzled by their child? Was Jesus ever impatient with the constraints of remaining in Nazareth rather than living in Jerusalem near the temple? We know that when Jesus did embark on his public life his relatives, including his mother, thought that perhaps he had become mentally unbalanced.

John tells us that to be a holy family means to be united in love. It means that disagreements and misunderstandings are never allowed to break the bonds of love. It means that even when we are bewildered by the actions of others, we remain loyal to them, trying to understand, not judging. John also tells us that we are family to all to whom we are bound in love.

Love, has many facets. It is like a diamond whose beauty is composed of many points of light. One facet of love is the willingness to reach out to others who cross our path. Today, with our global village and communication, that is everyone. It means that differences of opinion, disagreements, disagreeableness, are never powerful enough for us to give up on others whether they are blood kin, community, national, or international figures or communities. Love does not

mean agreeing, but it does mean that we are willing to listen and to ask questions, as Jesus did in the temple.

Together, this morning, we have considered many things: prayer, the two holy families, Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus as a young man in the temple. Jesus as a human being, growing up, increasing in grace and wisdom. Is there any way in which all these things are connected? One, way, perhaps, is this. There is no conflict between the divine and the human. As Jesus shows us, to grow into our humanity is to grow into our divinity: there is no separation. Whatever Jesus did was both fully human and fully divine – at the same time. No separation into compartments. When we allow ourselves to be human, to experience the negativity in life, but to confront it with love and prayer, we, too grow into divinity. Individuals and families and nations are holy, not because they do not have emotions, likes and dislikes, but because they never allow the negativities to dissolve the bonds of love.

Nancy C. Ring