

Sunday Homily

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH

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YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“My child, why have you done this to us?”

Illustration

In the Holy Land, there is a basilica dedicated to Jesus the Adolescent. It is the chapel of a trade school run by the Salesians of Don Bosco, set high in the hills above Nazareth. Here teenage Palestinians are trained for a variety of occupations, including carpentry. The basilica is dedicated to a boy of their age and within it is a statue of the teenage Jesus. This is a rare sight. The notion of Jesus as an adolescent is one that is difficult for Christians to imagine. We are able to picture Jesus as a baby, and there are numerous images of Jesus as an adult, but a teenage Jesus, neither child nor adult, an adolescent Jesus, is somehow beyond our imagination. Why is this?

Gospel Teaching

In the Gospel today, Mary and Joseph have been with the twelve-year-old Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a custom for all Jewish males to visit the Temple three times a year, to commemorate three major festivals: Passover, Pentecost and the feast of Tabernacles. By recording this journey, Luke shows us the commitment that Mary and Joseph had to the practice of their faith and their fidelity to its law.

Jesus, perhaps unwittingly, causes them huge anxiety when he goes missing. Such is his interest in spiritual matters that he stays behind in the Temple to continue talking to the elders. He seems oblivious to the concern of his parents when they express their distress at having lost him. As far as Jesus is concerned, he is doing what he simply needs to do. His words to his parents may seem rather brusque and dismissive: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father’s affairs?”

Apart from this story of Jesus in the Temple, the Gospels remain silent about his life between infancy and baptism. In this account Jesus is on the cusp of becoming a teenager, an unpredictable time when family life can be thrown into turmoil and confusion. Staying behind to talk “religion” is not, perhaps, the most predictable activity of a teenager.

Application

Sadly, we often hear only negative things about young people. The media portray knife crime, gang warfare and binge drinking as being what young people are about. Yes, of course adolescents can at times be remote, moody and argumentative – as, if we're honest, all of us can. But rarely do our newspapers report the magnificent things that young people are doing and are involved in and are thinking about.

Each stage of life has its own spirituality – teenagers don't simply fall into some spiritual black hole. This is the time when many are questioning assumptions and choosing to find their own way and practise their hopes for the future. Caring about the environment, oppression, the impact of natural disasters and atrocities – things that many young people are passionate about – are ways of expressing their desire for a world that is just and compassionate. Far from being spiritually vacuous, young people may have their own ways of praying and loving – briefer, more intense perhaps than the ways of those of us who are older, but possessing their own integrity. Just like people of any age they make mistakes and can be difficult, but they are as much in need of a sense of forgiveness and the love of God as the rest of us.

The "holy" family is a family that is willing patiently and lovingly to bear with each other at every stage of life. Knowing that Jesus was himself an adolescent is a matter for hope. It does not provide a blueprint of adolescent conduct but does confer infinite worth on this stage of life as on every other. If Jesus was as much at one with God in adolescence as in infancy and in adulthood, then it must be affirmed that there is, for all young people, the potential to have a life in relation to God that is no less complete.

As we celebrate this feast of the Holy Family, let us pay particular attention to the young people in our midst; and pray that as families and as a society we will have the confidence to embrace them warmly and generously and with understanding, remembering that we are all, as St John says, "the children of God". Those of us who are parents may have every sympathy with Mary and Joseph in today's Gospel. But let us see in each of our young people the face of the young Christ who himself wandered off, failing to tell anyone where he was.