

## The Holy Family, 2017.

## Our spiritual Heritage.

At a time when family life is under enormous pressure our readings today may not appear to have much to offer us as they look back over up to 4000 years in history. And yet, there is much that we can learn, especially trust.

The passage from the Book of Genesis brought in the figure of Abraham, a nomad, who left the city of Ur on the Persian Gulf in response to a vision where God promised to form him and his descendants into a great people, but not there on the Persian Gulf.

So Abraham, together with Sarah, his wife, set out, trusting the vision and believing that God would lead them to wherever He wanted to settle them. After a lot of meandering they found themselves in the area that is Israel today, but even after all those years of wandering there were still no children to fulfil the promise of a multitudinous offspring.

As we heard in our first reading, Abraham's trust was beginning to waver, but God re-assured him again, with asking him to look up into the night sky and count the stars, for so numerous would his offspring be.

Not long after that Isaac was born, and it seems that Abraham lived long enough to see the first of his grandchildren, but not without one last test to Abraham's faith, where he was asked to sacrifice his son, in spite of the fact that the fulfilment of the promise rested on Isaac. We know that through an Angel God intervened at the last moment, but which one of us would be prepared to have his or her faith put to the test to such extent?

The Gospel then shows us that trust in a different way when Mary and Joseph take their infant son Jesus to the Temple to offer him there to God, in response to a Jewish Law which said that every first-born male child should be offered to God 40 days after its birth, in remembrance of how the Jewish first-borns were saved, when the Angel of Death slew all Egyptian first-borns when Pharaoh refused to let the Jewish people go, freed from their slavery.

Because of this, the Jewish people considered all first-born sons as belonging to God, but after offering them in the Temple, they could buy them back, as it were, at the cost of a lamb, or 2 young pigeons if they were poor.

The faith, or trust, of Mary and Joseph is focused not so much on the sacrifice, but on their utter trust in God, which permeated their whole life. We see that in Mary, when she accepted the message which asked her to be the mother of God's Son. We see that in Joseph, when he believed the messages brought him by Angels in his dreams, - to take Mary home as his wife; - as he shouldered the responsibility of being husband and father, and

when he took Mary and the Child to Egypt to escape the murderous intent of King Herod.

We find a similar trust in the mention of Simeon and Anna: - Simeon in recognising, first of all, the voice of the Holy Spirit which revealed to him that he would not see death until he'd cast his eyes on the Messiah, and then recognised him in the person of a child that was just 40 days old. And there's Anna: 84 years old, married at a young age, and widowed just seven years later, spending her time in the Temple, fasting and praying.

Each of them lived in an atmosphere where God was real, and where they responded to Him as the most natural thing in their lives.

And that is where today's celebration of the Holy Family becomes significant. Where is that awareness of God's presence in, around and within our lives? Most of that would have grown at home with our family, when as children we were led to prayer and introduced to the Sacraments, but how is that being nourished today?

In the 1950s the American Rosary priest, Fr. Patrick Peyton came to Australia with the slogan: "The family that prays together stays together." What he shared was a profound truth, although the emphasis on the Rosary warped the slogan a little. I have memories of us as a family kneeling on the lino around our kitchen table, straight-backed beside our chairs, reciting the Rosary, and getting more and more uncomfortable as it went on. It didn't nourish our spirit of prayer particularly well. Much more prayerful were the times when we were asked to lead grace before meals, to pray together for sick neighbours or relatives, or to pray over decisions that had to be made.

It was then that our family grew together, and that the truth of living in God's presence became a reality, - as well as through going to Mass together.

It leads me to ask how frequently you as parents or as married couples pray together about the multitude of concerns that make up family life? It also strikes me how little young couples who want me to do their wedding papers are praying together. How will they spiritually nurture their life together if not already at this time they share their prayer with each other, when there are so many things to think about and prepare for?; - if they do not already bring God into their relationship, and to trust in the grace which He gives.

There are many questions this feast of the Holy Family can lead us to think about, and to learn from Abraham, Mary and Joseph, as well as Simeon and Anna, to trust in God's presence in every circumstance of our lives.