

Holy Family 2018

Jesus, a teenager.

It is little more than a fortnight ago that most schools said farewell to the young people of Yr 6, who have now completed their Primary Education. The vast majority of those young people would have been 12 years of age, the same age Jesus was when the episode in today's Gospel took place. It is important to recognise this, because invariably the transition from being a Primary School student to one in Secondary School is a milestone that brings with it a complete transformation that manifests itself in the transition from more or less total dependence on one's parents, to the growing independence of adolescence and breaking away from the bonds of family life.

Jesus, in today's gospel, would be just about ready to go through his Bar Mitzvah ceremony, when on his 13th birthday he would become a "Son of the Law", the time when he would be expected to take on the obligations of the Law, where he had the right to wear a prayer shawl in the synagogue, and was considered adult enough to learn a trade, to serve as a journeyman, and begin to earn an income for his living.

We do Jesus a disservice, therefore, if we picture him here as a naughty child, who thoughtlessly stayed behind, causing panic and anxiety to his distraught parents. He was a teenager asserting his growing independence in pursuing his own interest as a "son of the Law", and where better to do this than in the temple at Jerusalem?

Today's Gospel story, therefore, shows us how truly human Jesus was, and how the life of the Holy Family was beset with the same anxieties and perplexities that beset the parents of teenagers today.

Most of us know how hard it can be for parents when a child, on the brink of adulthood, breaks into a world beyond what the parents have known, or seem to know. It can happen through an experience like going away on camp, through meeting new friends, or any new real-life situation they are faced with. Suddenly there is a gap between parent and child.

The teenager laments: "They don't understand." The people who once seemed so wise, now seem too old, too worldly, too cautious. And to parents, their fledgling adult seems too impatient, not realistic, inconsiderate, ungrateful for the care and protection that now seem to him or her like prison bars. While the parents say: "Wait", the teenager says: "I can't wait", - and to the assertion: "You don't know", the teenager, who no longer feels him or herself a child, counters with an emphatic: "I do know". For parents there is often a crisis, or a

series of crises that are sometimes small, sometimes big, but each of them is also an opportunity for growth and new life for all involved.

On this feast of the Holy Family, Mary becomes for us the inspiration of a deep and persevering trust for all who do not fully understand, but are willing to grow in faith. Together with Joseph, she endures all the feelings involved in raising a child: astonishment, anxiety, amazement, lack of understanding and love.

We can only wonder what this mixture of pain and joy was for Mary and Joseph as they travelled back to Nazareth and took up their everyday tasks with a young man who would never be their child again. We can only wonder how, in the months and years ahead, this family found new ways within their old ways. There are signs enough in the other Gospel stories that the relationship was not easy, and that should be a powerful encouragement to parents today. Children are not your possession, but rather your companions on the pilgrimage of life. And parents have to find within themselves the wisdom of God to discern, to believe, to uphold, to restrain, to let go, and to recognise their mistakes.

Towards the end of this Gospel passage we read that Mary treasured all these things in her heart, until she grew to understand and accept the mission of her son. The Gospel passage then concludes with the words: "Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them", and he "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour." We are left with the re-assuring thought that when family life is a mutually respectful affair between parents and children, both grow in maturity.

At times it will be the children who do not understand their parents' concerns. And sometimes it will be the parents who do not understand their children's need to separate themselves and extend their boundaries beyond the safety of a protective home. But when both exercise trust and faith, both will "increase in wisdom and years, and in divine and human favour."

Today, on this feast, let us celebrate the gift of family, the foundation of our society. And let us ask God to bless our families with the spirit of a loving trust and faith in each other, especially in those families who are going through some difficult times with their teenagers.

May they find joy and support in one another and also from us.