

## Holy Family – December 27, 2015

This is the third time in 4 years I have given my reflections on Holy Family Sunday here at St. Joe's. Maybe I am becoming the Holy Family Guy.

That's a bit irreverent, but then so too is Jesus's answer to his parents in today's Gospel.

They are understandably distraught at having lost him for three days and their first question is "Child, why have you treated us like this?"

Jesus's unruffled response is a sign of the many startling things he goes on to say during his life: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

And so his parent's confusion gets even deeper. Not only do they have no idea why he went missing, they also cannot comprehend this talk about his Father's house. Surely, that was back in Nazareth.

But children can surprise you like that and, as they say, out of the mouths of babes...

I know this from experience. When my eldest son, David, was about 3 years old he was already well on his way to demonstrating he had a mind of his own.

I have forgotten now what I was saying to him, but I must have been telling him to do something like eat his dinner or sit up straight. However, what I remember quite vividly is his response: "Yes Your Majesty".

It caught me completely by surprise. Not that he was resisting my instructions, but rather that he already understood something about power relationships and irony. Not bad for a three-year old.

And it taught me something: never underestimate children, especially your own.

But if the Gospel reading highlights the precociousness of children, particularly Jesus, it also balances this with something else: obedience

After Jesus explains what he was doing in the Temple, he returns with his parents to Nazareth to resume his life as their son.

And so, the glimpse of divinity in his response about his Father's business is leavened by the humanness of being Mary and Joseph's son. These two natures coalesce: Jesus submits to their will, just as he ultimately submits to the will of his Father in heaven.

We see in this humble family relationship, the seeds of Jesus's redemptive mission.

Perhaps this is not altogether surprising. So much happens in families.

In celebrating the Feast of the Holy Family, we are celebrating Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a family, but we are also celebrating family itself.

The Holy Family is not some idealized version of family that we should all be striving to attain. It was a family like so many others, with the tensions and consternation that typify such intimate groups of people living and growing together.

This is why the Gospel reading is so striking today. It portrays a family of three real people rather than a triptych of sculpted saints.

And it resonates with us because family relationships are so basic to human existence. They are the matter of human life, the atomic particles of society on which all other social structures are built.

Familial relationships are the first ones we know. As soon as we are born, we enter into a relationship with parents, particularly mothers. And in the initial years of our lives, these relationships are largely the only ones we know.

To be sure, not every baby grows up in a relationship with his or her natural parents, but if not them, then someone else takes their place.

And when these relationships fail or are broken, the results are often catastrophic, as we have been so recently reminded by the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Yet another aspect of family relationships is that children do not get to choose them. We can choose our friends and our work colleagues, but we cannot choose our parents and our siblings.

We are born or adopted into our relationships with them. We do not earn or forge these relationships. The love that binds them is unconditional.

And so, it is with our relationship with God. We are the chosen people, not the deserving ones. As John tells us in the Second Reading, we are God's children.

Over the course of my life, I have had the good fortune to experience this unconditional dimension of family quite personally.

And during the past 6 months, this experience has been quite intense with the birth of my first grandson, Stephen.

And today, I am here to share it with you as Stephen is presented for baptism.

I find myself irresistibly drawn to Stephen whenever I see him, and yet I cannot explain why.

His conversational skills are quite limited, he doesn't play or demonstrate any interest in sports. He has no interest in current affairs and has not read any books lately, good or otherwise.

I can't talk to him in any sense in which I talk to most everyone else.

And yet, I am compelled to talk to him, usually about whatever happens to come into my head or seems to be going in in his.

But when I talk to him, I sense that he is absorbing everything I say, even though he articulates no coherent response, and in fact is usually looking off in some other direction.

It's like praying to God. You say things convinced that God is hearing you. And in that act of faith, there is a communion that sustains you.

You know that someday, there will be an answer, even though it might not be the one you expect.

Talking to Stephen, to any 6-month old child is rather like that, especially when the child is part of your family.

Familial relationships are the closest things we can experience to our relationship with God.

They can sustain us in the same way, and perhaps they can even help get closer to God.

JMK