

Expect the Unexpected

A reflection on Holy Family Sunday (B) by Marc Caissy
Genesis 15. 1-6; 17.3b-5, 15-16; 21. 1-7
Hebrews 11.8, 11-12, 17-19; Luke 2. 22-40
Dec. 28, 2014

What a coincidence that, on this “in-between” Sunday, when we've learned once again that a little togetherness goes a long way, we're invited to look at what it means to be family. Naturally, our eyes turn toward the Nativity Scene where we get all emotional, wishing and hoping our families could be, or could have been, as peaceful and perfect as the one gathered around the manger.

We all too easily forget that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were just as human as you and I. Their story is one of lives not turning out according to expectations.

Who would expect a child who could:

- breathe life into birds fashioned of clay?
- resurrect a friend who fell from a roof?
- produce a feast from a single grain?

Pseudo-miracles, of course, narrated by a 2nd century author intent on giving the Christian Son of God super-powers similar to any divinity of the day. Needless to say, this infancy narrative never made it to the level of the four Gospels.

Even so, what we do know about the early years of Jesus' family shows that their lives had very unexpected turns indeed. Here we have a teenage girl visited by an angel who announces she will be the mother of the long-awaited messiah but the pregnancy begins before she's formally married. The father, anxious to avoid a scandal, plans a discreet exit for Mary, but is told in a dream not to send her away. The baby's birth is heralded by choirs of angels but Joseph is warned in another dream to flee Judea. His family ends up as refugees in a land where his people were once slaves.

In today's gospel, Luke narrates another unexpected event in the life of this poor family from Galilee. In the Temple for the purification ritual, they bump into Simeon, a devout senior, who held on to life only to see the promised Messiah. At the sunset of his years, Simeon's prayers are answered as he gets to hold the Emmanuel in his arms. Just how unexpected was THAT encounter for Mary and Joseph? Luke writes that they stood “*amazed*” at Simeon's words. As if that wasn't enough, an 84 year old widow happens to walk by and proceeds “*to speak about the child to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*”.

In the 1st reading, Abraham and Sarah experience intense joy when the Lord promises them a son in their sunset years. Simeon experiences a similar joy because Yahweh kept his promise, / i.e. that he would see the Messiah before passing on. BUT how much astonishment could Mary and Joseph take before bewilderment slipped into disbelief?

This is where we remind ourselves that we're celebrating the Holy Family. What is it that made them holy? We find an answer in the 2nd reading. *FAITH*, we read in Hebrews 11, “*is the assurance of things hoped for, / the conviction of things not seen*”.

The expression “by faith” is repeated three times in reference to Abraham, who “*set out for a place, not knowing where he was going*”, and to Sarah, Abraham's barren wife, who became pregnant with a man too elderly to have children. Expect the unexpected!

Today we celebrate the holiness of this family because of the quality of their trust in God. To paraphrase Benedict XVI, they had the faith of the “*anawim*”, i.e. *those who not only see themselves as poor, because they shun wealth and power, but also because of their deep humility, (...) which kept them radically open to the bursting in of grace.*” To use pope Francis' words, Jesus' family is holy precisely because they were open “to be surprised by the freshness, fantasy and novelty of the Holy Spirit”¹.

However, surprises are not only merry and bright. Just as Abraham accepted to sacrifice Isaac, the son through whom / God's promise was to be fulfilled, old Simeon warns Mary / that future events in her son's life would be as a *sword piercing her soul*. You see, the wood of the manger is never far from the wood of the cross.

Though pain and suffering were on their horizon, the Three from Nazareth trusted the Holy Spirit present in each one of them. Today, they not only challenge but help us to grow that quality of trust in Him.

- They stand next to parents anxious about their children's welfare.
- They walk with immigrants and refugees cut off from loved ones.
- They comfort teen moms and single parents, adoptive and blended families, joint-custody and same-sex families.
- They console prisoners, outcasts, the bullied, the abused, especially children forced to become child-soldiers, slaves, usually victims of unspeakable violence.

When we find ourselves confronting the unexpected, we need to remember Joseph and Mary gathered 'round Jesus in the manger. For every kind of family under the sun, the Three from Nazareth remain role models for the values God dreams modern-day families can embody.

Finally, let us also remember the closeness of the cross. It was part of their life and it is also part of ours. Constantly having to cope with circumstances that didn't turn out according to expectations, the Holy Family demonstrated unwavering hope, openness and trust. In other words, they taught us how to be holy.

¹ Pope Francis in a Dec. 2014 address to the Roman Curia.