

The Holy Family

This passage is found only in Luke's Gospel. Its opening sentence presents us with a picture of a devout Jewish family who travel each year from Nazareth in Galilee, in the northern part of present day Israel, south to its capital city Jerusalem, a distance of some 64 miles. The family, we learn, is traveling in a caravan, that is, in a group of families, of relatives and friends. They do so of course for protection and help. If they are walking, and if they can cover 20 miles a day, then their trip will take them about three days. We are not told how long they remain in Jerusalem. But sometime during the first day journey back home, Mary and Joseph cannot find their twelve-year old son anywhere among all the people in the caravan. So they turn around (alone, we have to suspect) and head back to Jerusalem. All parents can well imagine the state they must have been in: fear, anxiousness, and self-accusation (Why were we so careless?). It takes them three days to find him: one day out, one day back, and one day searching for him in the city. And when they do find him, Mary says what any mother in the same situation would say: "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety."

Up till now this story is a perfectly ordinary story, an event which all parents can image and some have experienced. It is the stuff of everyday life. But when the twelve-year responds to his mother's question, we move from the ordinary to the extraordinary. His response is not normal, not ordinary. Indeed it can even seem cruel. And then we could ask: Is this cruelty the result of an adolescent's inability to understand the anxiety he has caused his parents or is it rather the intended conscious cruelty of a precocious twelve-year old? For he says to her: "Why were you looking for me? "Why were we looking for you," Mary must be repeating silently to itself and then asking herself: "Does he really mean that? Does he really not understand what we have gone through, what we feel as his parents?"

But then the next sentence turns everything upside down. We are no longer in an ordinary human situation. Yes, he is their son, but now he corrects his mother by claiming an identity which changes the entire situation. She had said to him, "Your father and I have been seeking you with great anxiety." But he now says to her: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" She was talking about Joseph as his father, but he is talking about God as his father.

There is no development in the story beyond this point. We are told that “they did not understand what he said to them.” We could take that to mean that the story now returns to its ordinary beginnings. But that is a guess. What is clear is that the twelve-year old now acts in a redeeming way: “He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them....” So the strange and perhaps even cruelly precocious boy in the temple becomes the obedient son, and “his mother kept all these things in her heart.”

A day, an eventful day, indeed an eventful three days in the life of the Holy Family. But what does it mean for us? It teaches us that the divine and the human are not far apart, that one is found in the other, and that it is sometimes hard to recognize the divine in the ordinariness of our lives. Jesus is the boy next door, but he is also the Son of God. In this story he establishes his extraordinary identity in a way which brings suffering to his parents. So we might hope that this story was created to teach us this truth and did not actually happen. But if it didn't happen in this way, then it had to happen in some other way. Mary and Joseph had to be reminded of who this child was. I say reminded because the SS teach us that they both already knew that their son was extraordinary.

But perhaps this story reminds us of something which parents know. Children have their own personalities, and these personalities are not the parents' gift to their children. No, they are God's gift to them, and they can come very, very early in a child's life. In days gone by children were accepted into religious life and seminaries. We do not do that today. We feel children need time to find themselves. And yet sometimes a child from the earliest years will know what he or she wants to do with his or her life. Wise parents are patient with such children. They may insist that their children wait a little while before acting on these hunches, and that is probably good. But in the end they can and should support their children's inclinations, for they may indeed be God's call to them, as it was to the Lord Jesus at twelve year's old in our gospel today.