

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY-DECEMBER 27, 2020 (Fr. Yaw Acheampong)

READINGS: Genesis 15: 1-6; 17: 3b-5, 15-16; 21: 1-7;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 105;

Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19;

Gospel of Luke 2: 22-40

God's family: One family united in love

One of the popular words we read from Christmas greetings is "family". So, who and who make a family, considered the basic unit of every society? At its most basic level, Statistics Canada defines a family as a married couple with or without children living together, a lone parent with at least one child in the same house. This means that a person living alone cannot be described as being a family. The average Canadian family has classically been understood as a nuclear family with their extended family living separately. Over the past years the concept of a family as a basic unit in Canada is undergoing some changes. In some cultures, the word "family" can be extended to other members of extended family living in the same household. In some other cultures, people living in a small village where they know each other consider themselves to be part of a family.

Today, our Christmas celebration brings us to the celebration of another type of family. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and her spouse Joseph. The Sunday after Christmas Day is celebrated as the Feast of the Holy Family. Because Christmas Day occurred on Friday, the two celebrations-the Solemnity of Christmas Day and the Feast of the Holy Family are very close to each other. The three readings for today's liturgy invite us to reflect on the deeper meaning of family and its spiritual significance in the lives of every Christian.

We begin with the first reading from the Book of Genesis that describes the situation in which Abraham became our father in faith. The passage begins with the following words: "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision-- Be not be afraid". Although Abram had been faithful in his journey of faith, he didn't have any heir. Abram was sad, worried and fearful because he wondered what would become of his name if he died without children. But God made a covenant with Abram by promising Abram that Abram would have innumerable descendants like "the stars in heaven". God changed Abram's name to Abraham meaning "the father of a multitude of nations". However, Abraham was doubtful of God's promises because he and his wife Sarah were old. Today's reading skips some passages that tell the story about the birth of Ishmael to Abraham and Hagar, the maidservant to Sarah. God finally fulfilled his promise to Abraham and Sarah by giving them a son named Isaac. Through Abraham and his heir, all the nations of the world would receive a blessing, because it was from his descendants that Christ came.

The story about Abraham and Sarah in the first reading is again mentioned in the second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. The writer describes how the faith of Abraham and his wife Sarah had made them the parents of many descendants. It was by faith that Abraham responded to the call to offer up his only son Isaac.

The stories of Abraham and his family in the first and in the second readings lead us to the Gospel reading from Luke. Today Gospel passage is also a birth narrative-- of Jesus. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus marked him as a special child with a unique destiny. However, despite the uniqueness of Jesus, his parents were required according to the customary law of their people, to present the child to God in the temple. It was at this presentation that Simeon, a devout Jew and Anna, a prophetess spoke what they knew about the child Jesus to his parents. It is interesting to note that Simeon and Anna both had grown old under the burden of years, yet they were in a faithful spiritual relationship with God. Their relationship with God led them to see in the child as the one destined to redeem the people of Israel. In their own different circumstances, Simeon and Anna therefore played prophetic roles in proclaiming who the child Jesus would be.

Today's passage concludes by telling how Jesus as a child "grew and became strong filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was with him". Today's narrative teaches that Jesus is divine with a special mission. Jesus's mission as the Son of God would also bring suffering to all those who would be close to him including his mother. Simeon told Mary that, "a sword will pierce your own soul too". Not much is reported in this Gospel and in the other Gospels about Jesus growing up in the home of his family except that they all lived as a family.

How are we supposed to interpret today's three readings? In the light of what we celebrate today-- the Feast of the Holy Family, the readings tell us about the dynamics of a human family. When we talk about the Holy Family, we may have the tendency to think that the Holy Family was entirely different from any other family including our own families. We might tend to ask: how can we relate to the Holy Family in our own time? Yet, this is essentially the same reason that the Church gives us the Holy Family as our model. The Holy Family had their own shares of challenges, difficulties and pain. For example they experienced what some families do experience in our own time when they lived away from their own country- as refugees in Egypt for fear of Herod.

In this challenging time of COVID-19 pandemic, there is even a new understanding of a family. Members of a family living together in the same household are considered a unit and the family is different from members of the same family who may be living separately. To reduce the spread of the transmission of the coronavirus, we have been asked to celebrate the Christmas and the New Year festivities only with members of a family living in the same household.

Today's readings remind us that as baptized people, we have become adopted children in Jesus. We are God's children through Abraham. Abraham is considered the "father of faith" not only to the Jewish people and Christians but also to the people of the Islamic faith. In the Christian faith, although we come from different backgrounds of race, language, culture and social status, today's celebration reminds us that we are all one big family belonging to God. As Christians, we are related to each other not by blood but through the covenant that God made with Abraham.

The celebration of the Feast of the Holy Family also reminds us of the saints who faithfully witnessed to Christ by their lives on earth. We describe the saints as "holy" for the faithful relationship they had with God and with others. The loving relationships between the saints and God were a reflection of their service to others. This is faithful discipleship-- discipleship modeled

by the lives of Mary and Joseph. We can learn from the Holy Family how to trust God to lead us. As we continue with our celebration of the Christmas Season, let us pray that the loving relationships between the members of the Holy Family may encourage us to live as people of love and peace. May God bless you and your families.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

(Please note that homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance)