

Holy Family

Preached December 31, 2017: St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

I will begin today real life parable:

A priest and a woman psychologist were collaborating in counseling a couple experiencing some rather severe conflicts in the married life. The priest listening to the two of them tell the story of the conflict thought it was pretty cut and dry. She had spoken about everything he was doing wrong. It was the usual story: he was insensitive, rude and abusive in his language towards her, distant and uninvolved in the family. He agreed with her story. So it was just a matter of helping him to change.

The woman psychologist, however, was a bit more perceptive. She told the priest, "She's the problem." Basically, the psychologist suggested that she was a rather domineering woman who treated him like a child. He had responded by giving up, rendering his dutiful lip service to her story, checking out of the marriage, and seeking revenge by his petty abusive language.

We hear a lot today about "toxic masculinity" - and there is surely no shortage of prominent men who have been behaving badly - but nothing about "toxic femininity". The two go hand in hand. Both men and women are fallen creatures and they would do well in looking to the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph for light and healing in their lives and in their marriages.

In the meantime marriage and family life has suffered a catastrophic collapse. It has reached the point that we do not even really know what it is all about any more. This collapse is connected with the rejection of fatherhood, which itself is connected with the rejection of authority. It is good to have father's involved in the lives of their children, but a father is not just an auxiliary mother.

Today I will look to the examples of Abraham and St. Joseph, given us in Sacred Scripture. I will focus on the faith and religious practice of Abraham, husband and father of a family and St. Joseph, husband and father of the Holy Family. The right exercise of authority is dependent on subordination to higher authority and God is, of course, the supreme authority.

Abraham was not the sort of man who goes to Mass because his wife nags him to do so; he wasn't even the sort of man who goes to Mass because he sees it as his responsibility to set a good example for his children and so steps up to do so. Abraham was the sort of man who leads, guides, and protects his family by the strength of his own faith in God. The same was true, and even more so, of St. Joseph.

Abraham led his family out of their homeland, following the call of God, journeying toward a land that was promised him. He believed and put his trust in the promise of God that he would become the father of a great multitude. When he received Isaac, the son of the promise, he willingly offered him back to God, believing as we have heard to day, that God was able to raise him even from the dead.

Abraham's faith was not merely an abstract "Yes, that is so" sort of faith, but was a faith that gave light to his mind and guided the important decisions of his life. He was willing to do things God's way and put his trust in God's promises.

Finally, Abraham's faith was the faith of a pilgrim. Even when he led his family towards an earthly destination, his ultimate goal, like the symbol he received in Isaac, was beyond the confines of this world.

Very often, when I talk to couples preparing for marriage, they talk about their desire to 'form a family'. When a man and a woman choose to marry and form a family their natural instinct goes to having children and providing a home for those children. Much of a family's energy is devoted to building and maintaining a 'family home'.

That is good, but it is also a temptation. Very often the family's vision goes no farther than that 'family home'. They forget that, in a way, they should be like Abraham, dwellers in tents, always on a journey because no home in this world is truly permanent.

We could perhaps paraphrase the words of Jesus here and say, "He who seeks to establish his family home in this life, will lose it, and he who is willing to lose his home in this life for the sake of my Father's house in heaven, will find a true home for himself and his family." (cf. Mt 16:25) That is the vision required of a man of faith who will be a wise and provident husband and father in his family. Such was St. Joseph.

The Gospels reveal St. Joseph, the least in order of personal dignity and holiness, as the head of the Holy Family. The angel appears to him and he receives Mary as his wife; the angel appears to him, and he leads the family into exile in Egypt to escape Herod; the angel appears to him again and then he brings the family back to Nazareth.

Even more remarkable, Jesus, the Son of God, obeyed Joseph and called him 'Father'. He was no mere 'step-dad', nor just a 'guardian'. Jesus was not born to a single mother, he was not an 'illegitimate' son, but he was born to a Virgin married to a man. As a result, even though he was not conceived in the normal fashion, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was not just the fruit of Mary's womb, but in some way the fruit of the married love of Mary and Joseph, given to them by God. Certainly

Joseph more truly filled the role of 'father' to the man Jesus than many absent or excluded fathers fill that role for their biological children.

In today's Gospel we hear that after Jesus was born *they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ... in accordance with the dictates in the law of the Lord.*

Now it was the Jewish husband and father who had the special responsibility for knowing and fulfilling the requirements of the law of the Lord, even with respect to the wife and children. Joseph brought Mary and Jesus to Jerusalem. It was his responsibility and he fulfilled it. Joseph oversees the family's fulfillment of their religious duties.

In sum: the man of faith leads his family on a pilgrimage whose ultimate goal is the house of our Father in heaven and for that reason he is also diligent in overseeing the religious practice of the family. Religious practice, besides fulfilling our fundamental obligation to give honor and worship to God the Creator of all, is always a very practical expression of faith, not according to our own fancy, but according to God's law. This practical expression of faith reminds us also of our life's supreme goal and provides us with the light and strength we need for the journey.

In our own time family life is subject to so many external pressures that tear it asunder and so many interior wounds, divisions, and dysfunctions. We need examples and we need vision, but the examples that lie at hand in the experience of our own families are themselves weak and imperfect. The Holy Family gives us a true vision, showing us what a family should be, while at the same time bringing the grace of healing to our broken and wounded families and the strength needed for families to direct their steps towards the hope and promise of family life.