

122709O LITTLE TOWN OF NAZARETH

(Only a small portion of Jesus' life was his public ministry, yet he was saving the world even in the obscurity of Nazareth.)

In the Church's wisdom the last Sunday in the calendar year is always the feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth. The first Sunday of the calendar year is always the Feast of the Epiphany. The Epiphany means manifestation. God reveals himself to us. We do not have a God who is content to create and then remain at a distance. Our God creates and then enters into his creation. Our God reveals to us who he is. At the end of the year we celebrate the Holy Family because that becomes part of the definitive revelation from our God. The distinctive Christian revelation and insight into God is that God is not only one but God is more. God is personal. God is a community of persons bound together by love. In short, God reveals that in essence God is family. And we, who are made in the image and likeness of God, are family precisely because God is family.

When I think of the holy family, however it is difficult for me to think of them in terms of ordinariness. A divine Son, a sinless mother, a truly just stepfather. These are not typical members. And yet, in the gospel story for today they seem very much like every other human family. Can't you hear the worry and the anxiety of Mary and Joseph? They have been entrusted with the care and upbringing of the very Son of God, the Messiah and they have suddenly lost him. And when they find him, the disappointment and the hurt is palpable. There is obviously misunderstanding. Jesus stays behind on purpose and his parents thought he was traveling with them. Expectations on both sides are not met. This family is going to have to make some adjustments and to learn patience just like every other human family. This family too is going to have to learn how to take the time to talk with each other and listen to each other, and yes, even forgive each other, not because there is sin but because there is hurt. Not every hurt is sin but every hurt is real and calls for some healing, some forgiveness.

The faith and love in the holy family of Nazareth, just like the faith and love in your family and mine will be put to the test—and often. Yes, there is grace here but there is little or no protection here from the vagaries of life: the job market, family members at very different places and sometimes drastically different in their understanding of things. There are hurt relationships, strained marital bonds, sometimes poor or untimely or fearful decisions. And almost always there will be broken hearts.

Almost all of Jesus' earthy life is lived under these constraints—over 90% of his life in Nazareth. As Charles de Foucault, the French mystic and

hermit once wrote of Nazareth: “Jesus came to Nazareth, that place of hidden life, of ordinary life, of family life, of prayer, of work, of obscurity, of silent virtues practiced with no witnesses other than God, his friends and neighbors. Nazareth...that place where most people live their lives...” Yes, we are all from Nazareth.

But there are other things true of that Nazareth—and every Nazareth. It is the place where our salvation came of age; where an ordinary existence nurtured an extraordinary life; where a carpenter plied his trade; a mother tended her house; a little boy grew into a man. It is where a man who dared to dream, attend to his dreams and listen to them went to raise his family. A holy family. A happy family. All at Nazareth.

The question facing us this Sunday is a simple one. Do you believe that God knows everything of your life right now? Does God know all that is going on around you and within you? Do you believe that God’s grace is available to you and that the Lord desires to deliver his grace to you for the life you are in? Yes, living does test our faith—often. But tests are just that—tests. God’s grace is what enables us to pass the test even when we feel it not, even when God chooses to remain silent. The lesson of the family from Nazareth is a simple one. All is grace. Grace is everywhere. Everything is grace.