

“JESUS FINDS HIMSELF”

Liturgically, we find ourselves in a period of religious history that is compressed and slightly out of order, at least as it pertains to the chronology of events. Friday, we were celebrating the birth of Jesus; today, we are witnessing to Jesus’ first Passover; next Friday, we celebrate the circumcision and naming of Jesus; next weekend, we celebrate the Epiphany of Jesus as the Lord, to the three Kings; and the weekend after the Epiphany, we find ourselves witnessing to the Baptism and beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

The events of the Nativity, Circumcision, Epiphany and Baptism, begin to serve the purpose of informing others of the real person of Jesus. But today’s special feast of the Holy Family, allows us to speculate into the nature of the life and upbringing that helped informed Jesus.

Today’s gospel reading, presents the period in the life of Jesus, when he became a man, in accordance with the Jewish customs. At the age of twelve, Jesus was to become a son of the law and to take upon himself, the obligation of the law. So, Jesus went to the feast of Passover, for the first time.

During this feast, it was the custom of the Sanhedrin to meet in public in the Temple court to discuss religious and theological issues. And, when presented to them, they would listen to and address those questions that were posed by all of the visiting people in their presence. Hearing and asking questions is the regular phase for a student learning from his teachers. Jesus was listening to the discussions and eagerly searching for knowledge like any other avid student.

We could well imagine how the holy city and the Temple and the sacred ritual, a very public event, amidst a large crowd, would have fascinated him.

Jesus begins to find himself, and the preparation for Jesus to reach this point was very much influenced by the love, guidance, instruction and correction of his parents, Mary and Joseph. It is this influence of his parents, during the periods of Jesus’ hidden life, which brought Jesus to an exclusive sense of his unique relationship, as Son of God. And as noted within our Gospel reading, this parental influence may have partially helped generate Jesus’ gentle and definitive pronouncement of transfer of the name “Father”

from Joseph to God. **“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”**

Parenting always requires that children are gradually inserted into the larger community. Children also need to be shown a path to a spiritual well. Otherwise, they will always be thirsty. When a child is sure of their parent’s love, they are encouraged to go out and explore the world. They learn to find themselves. This applied to Jesus as well.

First, there is Mary, the motherly influence. Mary is the resourceful, young woman who bore a son at an early age; who then fled with her family into another country; who raised her son in difficult circumstances, uncertainty and mystery; but who accomplished all of this because of her faith.

We first witnessed her personal character, at the moment of the Annunciation, an example of how God enters into our everyday life; an example how God speaks to us, how he begins the conversation in often unexpected ways.

We witnessed her human response of fear and confusion and possible unworthiness, due to human limitations. We witnessed the questioning of God’s will in her life, especially, when confronted with dramatic changes.

But, God assured Mary, by showing signs of his promise already fulfilled in the lives of others. In this case, Mary saw what God had done in her cousin Elizabeth; for Mary went quickly, to see for herself the evidence of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, as God’s truth and fulfillment of her own course of action. With her “yes”, Mary offered herself and her humility, obedience, love and trust to God. Mary the real-life believer began the growth of a personal relationship with God.

The Church tells us that Mary became the “first disciple” because she was the first to receive the Word of God, Jesus. She was the first to announce the good news of his coming birth to her cousin Elizabeth. She was the first prophetic voice of the New Testament, who offered her praise of God, in the “Magnificat”, announcing the delivery of her people. She was the first to point us to Jesus, at the Wedding in Cana, when she said “Do whatever he tells you.” Mary became the contemplative who treasured all these things in her heart.

And then there was Joseph, the step-fatherly influence. Joseph was unwilling to expose Mary, in her pregnancy. Joseph was the compassionate and forgiving person, who took Mary as his wife. Joseph was the troubled person, especially after his disturbing dreams, who showed great obedience to the Word of God, and who took his family to Egypt for protection from harm.

Joseph was probably most instrumental in developing Jesus, during these years of his hidden life. As an honest craftsman, Joseph would instruct Jesus in the virtues of patience, judgment, honesty and persistence, as he taught his craft; patience for wood to dry and be ready, judgment to ensure a straight plumb line, honesty for charging a fair price and persistence for sanding a table top smooth.

Joseph, as the devout religious man, would have been equally instrumental in conveying his faith to Jesus. We can imagine the many opportunities to talk, in the workshop and at home, about God, the great men and women of the Old Testament scriptures, the many Hebrew prayers, the directions to listen to the town's rabbis and religious leaders, and the care of preparation for Jesus' bar mitzvah. Joseph led a life of quiet service to God, a life of humility and a life of joy.

When his parent's returned to the caravan, Jesus lingered behind. It was not through carelessness that they did not miss him. Usually, since they were much slower, the women in the caravan started out much earlier than the men. The men started out later and traveled faster and the groups would meet at the evening encampment. We could well imagine the freight that overcame Mary and Joseph, when each thought that Jesus was with the other parent. It was this time at evening camp that they missed Jesus.

Even though the incident of Jesus finding himself may have been painful for the parents, it had an effect of bringing them closer together. Jesus appreciated how much Mary and Joseph cared about him, so he gladly obeyed them.

And Mary and Joseph realized what a special child Jesus was. And they gave him the room, within their hidden lives, to grow; even though it meant

that he was growing away from them.

In our journey through life, we may be in the moment of finding ourselves; or we may be called to assist someone in search of their true self. And we may be the ones impacted by a loved one, when that journey is accomplished.

The members of the Holy Family were as real as any other human being that lived in our history. Our time spent reflecting on their lives would make us acutely aware of our own humanity. Their confidence in God, confidence in their mission from God and their humility before God could be guides for our confidence building, as we journey through our earthly life and our spiritual journey.

Jesus began to find himself in the Temple and to discover his true identity as the Son of God. Happy are we too if we find our true selves as human beings and children of God. The Holy Family can be a great help to us in this regard.