

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

### The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Year B

27 December 2020



### Collect

O God, who were pleased to give us  
the shining example of the Holy Family,  
graciously grant that we may imitate them  
in practising the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity,  
and so, in the joy of your house,  
delight one day in eternal rewards.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

### Readings and Commentaries

Unlike the other feasts of the Christmas season – Nativity, Epiphany, and the Baptism of the Lord – that of the Holy Family doesn't celebrate a gospel event or date back to early times. It was established only in 1893 by Pope Leo XIII. In the face of perceived threats to family values, he inaugurated the feast to uphold traditional Catholic teaching. The Holy Family was offered as a model of faith and love and devotion.

More than a century later, the notion of "family" has become more and more complex and contested. Ironically, the unusual composition of the Holy Family – a single child growing up with his biological mother and putative father – seems almost conventional in comparison with the many combinations that claim the title of "family" today. What may appeal most to us now about the feast of the Holy Family is its affirmation of the humanity of Jesus.

## A reading from the book of Genesis

15:1–6, 21:1–3

The word of the Lord was spoken to Abram in a vision, 'Have no fear, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great'.

'My Lord,' Abram replied 'what do you intend to give me? I go childless.' Then Abram said, 'See, you have given me no descendants; some man of my household will be my heir'. And then this word of the Lord was spoken to him, 'He shall not be your heir; your heir shall be of your own flesh and blood'. Then taking him outside he said, 'Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants' he told him. Abram put his faith in the Lord, who counted this as making him justified.

The Lord dealt kindly with Sarah as he had said, and did what he had promised her. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the time God had promised. Abraham named the son born to him Isaac, the son to whom Sarah had given birth.

## First Reading

Any shortened version of the Old Testament would retain the Genesis story of God's promises to Abram, Abram's trusting response, and their outcome in the birth of Isaac. The re-named Abraham is revered by Jews, Christians and Moslems alike. For century after century Abraham was invoked as "our father in faith" in the Roman Canon (now the first Eucharistic Prayer). It's a pity that the only Sunday on which this important text is read is at the height of the Christmas holiday season.

The reading is distinctive for combining two passages in the book of Genesis that are several chapters apart. Stories about the origin of circumcision, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the visit of the three messengers to Abraham and Sarah, and other dramatic events are leapt over in order to reach a brief account of Isaac's birth.

In response to Abram's distress at having no heir, God promises him descendants as many as the stars of heaven. In turn, Abram "put his faith in the Lord", a statement taken up much later by the author of the letter to the Hebrews and made much of by Paul in his letters to Galatia and to Rome. Fifteen hundred years later, it helped fuel the fierce Reformation debates about faith, works and justification.

Readers will readily take advantage of the conversational form of the reading to engage the congregation in this all-important story. But they will need to take care in negotiating the gap between the two sections of the reading. Sarah appears rather abruptly because of what has been left out. It is assumed we know she is Abraham's wife and co-sharer in God's promise.

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 104:1–6, 8–9

**R.** The Lord remembers his covenant for ever.

Give thanks to the Lord, tell his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.

O sing to him, sing his praise;  
tell all his wonderful works! **R.**

Be proud of his holy name,  
let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice.  
Consider the Lord and his strength;  
constantly seek his face. **R.**

Remember the wonders he has done,  
his miracles, the judgements he spoke.  
O children of Abraham, his servant,  
O sons of the Jacob he chose. **R.**

He remembers his covenant for ever,  
his promise for a thousand generations,  
the covenant he made with Abraham,  
the oath he swore to Isaac. **R.**

## Responsorial Psalm

The verses of the psalm are taken from the first section of Psalm 104/105, a song of thanksgiving for God's covenant love for Israel. The response, taken from the fourth stanza, states this theme in general terms, while the verse goes on to make explicit reference to the covenant with Abraham.

The psalm thus connects directly with the reading from Genesis. It repeatedly summons us to remember the signs of God's faithful love, in parallel with God's remembrance of us, his people. The reader should find it easy to pray in a spirit of confident assurance.

## **A reading from the letter to the Hebrews**

**11:8, 11–12, 17–19**

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and that he set out without knowing where he was going.

It was equally by faith that Sarah, in spite of being past the age, was made able to conceive, because she believed that he who had made the promise would be faithful to it. Because of this, there came from one man, and one who was already as good as dead himself, more descendants than could be counted, as many as the stars of heaven or the grains of sand on the seashore.

It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He offered to sacrifice his only son even though the promises had been made to him and he had been told: It is through Isaac that your name will be carried on. He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead.

## **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke**

**2:22–40**

When the day came for them to be purified as laid down by the Law of Moses, the parents of Jesus took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord [- observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord: Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord - and also to offer in sacrifice, in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Now in Jerusalem there was a man named Simeon. He was an upright and devout man; he looked forward to Israel's comforting and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord. Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the Law required, he took him into his arms and blessed God; and he said:

'Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised; because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.'

## **Second Reading**

The texts chosen for the first two readings may not seem to be particularly apt for the feast of the Holy Family. Presumably the reason for the selection is that they both present a husband and wife – Abraham and Sarah – as models whose trusting faith in ancient times can still inspire spouses and parents today.

There is no consensus among scholars about the author of the letter to the Hebrews, for whom the letter was written, or where and when it was composed. But from start to finish it is clearly a composition in high rhetorical style, drawing heavily on both Jewish scripture and Greek philosophy for its argument. The contents of the letter, especially the latter part, imply that its recipients are losing heart in the face of opposition or even persecution. The author sets himself to encourage them at length.

Chapter 11, from which today's reading is taken, is a roll-call of great figures of faith in the Old Testament. These usher in the witness borne by Jesus, our pioneer in faith (12:1-2). The text for today is an abbreviated account of the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Readers will grasp its meaning more fully if they take the time to read the whole of Chapter 11 (perhaps even from 10:19 through to 12:2).

Three examples of fruitful faith are presented: Abraham's setting out from his homeland, Sarah's belief in God's promise of a child, and Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac. In harmony with the letter as a whole, this passage is in an elevated literary style. Readers may need to read it aloud several times to ensure they can proclaim it effectively. The congregation will need to hear clearly what the key assertions are and what is commentary on them.

## **Gospel**

The gospel for today – the story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple – comes in two sharply contrasting forms. One option is very long, the other very short. The latter simply reports the presentation of Jesus, followed by the family's return to Nazareth. It is hard to see why there could not have been a more moderate compromise, taking the story through to the end of Simeon's canticle (the *Nunc dimittis*), then omitting his mysterious prophecy about the child's destiny and the testimony of the aged prophetess Anna, and going direct to Luke's editorial conclusion.

The longer version offers a wealth of material for reflection. Every character in the story is presented as a devout Jew. All of them are steeped in the Law and the Prophets; all are profoundly attentive to God's word; all are humble, trusting and obedient; all are filled with longing for God's promises to be realised. One of Luke's purposes here is to situate the birth of Jesus in the context of the covenant of old. God's faithful love for his people calls forth their patient trust and bears fruit in Jesus. At the same time Luke is alerting his readers to the fact that something entirely new is happening. Jesus will be "a light to

As the child's father and mother stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected - and a sword will pierce your own soul too - so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.'

There was a prophetess also, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well on in years. Her days of girlhood over, she had been married for seven years before becoming a widow. She was now eighty-four years old and never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer. She came by just at that moment and began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem].

When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him.

**[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]**

enlighten the pagans” as well as “the glory of your people Israel”. He is a child with a destiny: he will turn Israel upside down and uncover “secret thoughts”. At home in Nazareth, “God’s favour was with him”. This phrase anticipates both of Jesus’ baptisms: his baptism in the waters of the Jordan and his baptism in the blood of the cross.

## Prayer to the Holy Family

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,  
in you we contemplate  
the splendour of true love,  
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,  
grant that our families too  
may be places of communion and prayer,  
authentic schools of the Gospel  
and small domestic Churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,  
may families never again  
experience violence, rejection and division:  
may all who have been hurt or scandalized  
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,  
make us once more mindful  
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,  
and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,  
graciously hear our prayer.  
Amen.

*Pope Francis*

(Prayer for the Synod on the Family given by Pope Francis on the Feast of the Holy Family, 2013)