**THE HOLY FAMILY**

**SUNDAY WITHIN THE OCTAVE OF CHRISTMAS**

**26th December 2021**

There are alternative readings for this day, so I have concentrated on those suggested in The Sunday Missal for Year C

**First Reading 1 Samuel 1:20-22.24-28**

The story of Samuel (= heard of God) prefigures the story of Jesus. Both are first-born boys who are dedicated to God from their conceptions.

The Ark of the Covenant and Tabernacle were located at Shiloh before their relocation in Jerusalem. (The Tabernacle was YHWH’s mobile home and the Ark housed the stone tablets of the Law. Shiloh was in the hill country north of Jerusalem.)

At the time, old age, prosperity and male children were taken to be evidence of God’s approval of one’s life-style. Paradoxically, at the same time, God was also supposed to champion the poor and childless above the powerful and privileged. Hannah (= grace) is the typical oppressed woman of Israel - or of any time or place. Samuel, (= God’s gift), is God's answer to her fervent appeal for help and with her husband, Elkanah, (= God’s possession) commits the infant to the care of Eli, the priest at Shiloh.

Those who see Christianity simply as a personal commitment of one’s own life to the Lord have aroused one of the most widespread controversies resulting from the Reformation. Then, the Anabaptists tried to restrict profession of faith to adults who alone could make a positive decision to accept Christianity. They pointed out that Jesus’ disciples were all adults. Only adults are capable of understanding and a child is too young to appreciate the issues. Furthermore, no-one has the right to determine someone else’s obligations.

Catholics must respect their scruples, but point out that comprehension is still only partial in the wisest of adults. None of us ever fully understands. Indeed the absence of understanding is our opportunity to practise faith. Faith and doubt are an essential part of our life and there must be some uncertainty to enable us to exercise trust.

Then, in the 1st century Church, converts included whole households together, including slaves and children. Indeed, we take many decisions for our children before they start to take them for themselves, one of which could be Christianity. Remember, the paralysed man was healed because of the faith of his friends (Luke 5;20) So a principle is established where our friends may benefit from our faith and prayers.

But, finally and most importantly of all, Baptism is a sacrament through which God accepts us, and not the other way round. We do not decide even our own futures. We are received in the same spirit that moved Christ to embrace children.

Elkanah and Hannah in the event did not determine Samuel’s destiny. They offered him for the service of the temple, but instead the child grew up to be a prophet who played a major role in the affairs of state. Like the birth of Jesus, Samuel's birth is narrated in the light of his subsequent career.

**Responsorial Psalm: 83:2-3, 5-6, 9-10**

This is a psalm with affinities to the songs of Zion and to the pilgrim psalms, and speaks of the joy of worship in the temple. It would appear that it was designed for use at the autumn harvest festival (It was called Tabernacles because of the tents in which the reapers slept until the harvest was completed). Its date of origin is sometime during the age of the monarchy (v. 1).

The worshipper envies both the birds that live in the temple their whole lives long, having built their nests in its precincts, and the priests, whose work also keeps them in the temple all the time. Thus, the psalm serves fittingly as a response to the reading about Samuel, who was dedicated to the service of the earlier temple at Shiloh.

**Second Reading 1 John 3:1-2 & 21-24**

What is called ‘the first letter of John’ could have been written by the Apostle, but more likely by a John of the next generation. Its vocabulary, style and subjects are close to those of the fourth Gospel. It is dated about 50 years after the time of Jesus and addressed to a Church whose members would only ever have heard of Jesus from their parents and grandparents.

It is entirely natural therefore that they debated the questions, obvious to them, but which would not have occurred to their parents. How could the divine and human natures of Christ be compatible? Was he omniscient? And if so, from what age? Was he subservient to the Father? How could he be in more than one place at once, or pass through walls as in the Resurrection stories? Can his miracles be repeated by his disciples?

It is understandable that Christians came to different conclusions. Some thought that he laid aside his divinity during his time on earth, as Paul seems to say in Philippians 2;7. Such Christians were called Docetists. Or, some suggested that God had created Jesus as a lesser god. They were called Arians and their modern descendants, Jehovah’s Witnesses. Some thought Jesus was an apparition having

only the appearance of a human being. They were Gnostics. All were alternative options to the Catholic Church. It was John’s paramount concern to expose these ideas as heresies and establish the truth.

The immediate issue that prompted the letter is the fact that some members of the congregation to which it was addressed had left to start a new meeting, possibly Gnostic. (See 1 John 2;19, 4;1-3 and 4;20) The writer seeks to reassure the remaining members of the community that they, not the secessionists, are children of God. This title that has been conferred upon them by God's love, that is, by revelation and redemption in Jesus Christ. The secessionists deny the reality of that act and therefore do not share in that new status.

The heart of Christ’s teaching lies at the centre of the second paragraph in the meaning of ‘entolé’ (commandment). It can mean a commandment in the sense of a ruling which is to be obeyed and this was the way the Pharisees treated the Law of Moses. But Christ interpreted it far more flexibly to reflect the spiritual motivation behind the words which is the sense in which John uses it here. It is not rules, but love that binds members of the family together.

**Gospel Luke 2:41-52**

This story, concerning the twelve-year-old Jesus, is hardly an infancy narrative though it does conclude Luke’s section on the early years. Originally, the story seemed to pinpoint the 'Christological moment' - that moment when, in speculation, Jesus of Nazareth became Son of God. Here, in his adolescence, we have Jesus saying of himself what the heavenly voice will later say of him at his baptism (Luke 3:22).

Obviously, for Luke, the punchline is v. 49, ‘I must be busy with my Father’s affairs’ He might equally have said, 'Where would you expect a child to be but in his father's house?' The significance of this for Luke’s readers is that Jesus declares that God is his Father (in contrast to his legal father, v. 48) Luke is saying that from at least this point, he is conscious of his divine Sonship. It follows that the claims of this Father must override all other demands and his mission will eventually break the filial family ties. (see Mark 3:31-35).

Though the episode ends with Luke’s notice of his obedience to his earthly parents (2:51), his obedience as Son towards his heavenly Father transcends even that obedience to Mary and Joseph. His independent conduct here strikes a chord that will be heard again in the Gospel later on. It will show that Mary has progressed beyond the stage of misunderstanding attributed to her here (2:50) to one of those who hear the word of God and keep it. In other words, for Luke, Mary may be 'the mother of the Lord' (1:43), but it is much more important that her maternal ties yield to those of Jesus' heavenly Father. (The Orthodox title for her is ‘She who carried God’ or Theotokos)

'The birth stories contain much symbolism and their purpose is informative. The only eye-witness still present was Mary (and Joseph?). On the other hand, the adult stories came from remembered events from hundreds of witnesses. This story has a foot in both camps. The form critics call it a "legend." This does not mean that it is unhistorical, but that its value is not historical. There are many similar stories of a precocious childhood of a great person whose early life showed signs of coming greatness (for example, in the lives of Buddha or Alexander the Great or Mozart).

We recognize certain redactional concerns of Luke: the legal piety of Jesus' home (see Luke 2:21-22), shown in the devout observance of Passover customs; the effect of these remarkable incidents on Jesus' mother (see Luke 2:19); and the emphasis on the normality of Jesus’ development. (see Luke 2:40).

It is likely that Luke got the bones of the story from Mary as a remembered incident and then put flesh on it for his own reasons. Elements which suggest this are shown by the absence of any hint of the virginal conception ("his parents," "your father"). The answer of the boy Jesus in verse 49, with its reference to God as "my Father," seems to reflect a later consideration of his status.

The basic incident, however, is not only pre-Lucan but may well rest upon an authentic memory. And even the allusion to "my Father" may be pre-Christological, reflecting Jesus' growing historical awareness of his unique filial relation with God.

But our real concern must be with Luke's purpose in including this story in his Gospel. It is evidently part of his picture of Jesus' family. Seeing the behaviour of the adult Jesus in many different circumstances, we sense a perceptive and deeply spiritual human being. His personality is rounded, balanced and complete. Such an image can only derive from a contented and normal childhood and the fact that today’s Gospel has the only story from that period does nothing to contradict that picture.