

Gospel serves a spiritual feast

Stuffing ourselves seems the order of the day. Holiday dinners, parties, cookies and candy challenge our stomachs to meet the demands of the season. We also get stuffed with church. With Christmas on a Saturday this year, we barely get home to unwrap presents before it's time to drive back over for another Sunday Mass.

Fittingly, the Gospel for Holy Family Sunday is stuffed with several episodes from the infancy of Jesus. It includes the presentation in the temple, Simeon's proclamation that Jesus fulfills God's promise, Simeon's prophecy that Mary will be pierced with a sword of sorrow, Anna's appearance to agree with Simeon, and the report that the Holy Family returned to Nazareth where Jesus continued to grow. These 19 verses pack more story than a typical softdrink commercial.

If it's too much to digest, the liturgy permits us to use only the last two verses about the family's return home.

In spite of all that's crammed in here, how we long for more information about what took place between chapter 2 verse 40, where we stop today, and verse 41, where the suddenly 12-year-old Jesus plays a proto-typical Jeopardy! game with the teachers in the temple. We'd also like more story between that episode and the beginning of chapter 3, when the 30-something Jesus appears on the scene. The Bible remains tantalizingly quiet about the childhood and early adulthood of this amazing boy.

So, let's look at what the Bible does say in this lengthy account of the holy family's trip to Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph are taking Jesus to the temple to obey the law. What law? Look at Leviticus 12:2-8 for the requirements of purifying the mother of a newborn. (But be forewarned; it offers a politically very incorrect view of womanhood.) Exodus 13:1-2 gives the law of consecrating the first-born male to God. The law makes no mention of the temple, mainly because these passages concern the period of Israelite history before the temple was built.

So why are we in the temple today? By bringing Jesus into the temple the Gospel reminds us of several other passages. One is the birth of Samuel in 1 Sam:1-2. He is born of Hannah, a woman thought to be barren, and he's presented to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. Years later, Eli the priest blesses the parents. You'll see the same themes here we saw in the Gospel – bringing the child to a holy place, and hearing the elders speak well of him.

Luke also remembers passages we've seen already this season – Malachi 3:1, where the Lord's messenger comes suddenly into the temple; and Daniel 9:25, where the anointed prince will come to Jerusalem at the end of the 70 weeks. So, even though the law did not require Mary and Joseph to go to Jerusalem, their arrival brings fulfillment to many an Old Testament prophecy.

New prophecies come now from Simeon and Anna. (Luke frequently accentuates the role of women in his Gospel. One prophet would have served perfectly well

here, but a prophetic evenness.) Between their speeches stands the beautiful hymn proclaiming Christ as the light of revelation for the Gentiles. Under its Latin title, *Nunc dimittis*, this hymn still forms part of the Church's night prayer every day of the year. In the Gospel it's sung by an old man who's ready to die because he has finally seen the promised Christ. On our lips this prayer recognizes in our sleep a foreshadowing of death, and renders our thanks to God for letting us see Christ each day.

The title of Christ found in the hymn, *Lumen Gentium*, or "Light of the Nations," is also the title of Vatican II's Constitution on the Church. It defines our Church in terms of Christ. Christ illuminates the world, and the Church reflects the light of Christ for the same purposes.

The Gospel of Holy Family Sunday comes just when we've had so much spiritual food to eat we think we can't face another bite. Yet here it is, inviting us to think about where the Christmas mystery is leading us.

Has Christ become the light of nations? In what way? What nations do you think let the light of Christ shine? Does ours? How? How does it not?

The Holy Family made Church a priority. After the birth of their child they celebrated a religious ritual. What has the baptism of a child done for your family? Is its significance religious, social, or just a family expectation?

The Bible doesn't tell us more about the Holy Family. What do you think life was like for them?

Simeon predicted Mary would suffer many sorrows. Has motherhood changed? What are its sorrows? Its joys?

Celebrate Holy Family Sunday with a family discussion about how Christ has provided light for you.

This article first appeared in *The Catholic Key*, December 19, 1993, p. 15.