

It is no coincidence that the first feast we celebrate after Christmas is that of the Holy Family. If God wanted to be a man, he would have to become a son, like any one of us. His decision to become incarnate compelled him to submit to the authority of Mary and Joseph. This was a simple family. A young married couple of believers provided the first home and the best school where God learned to be human. Today we celebrate the family that was chosen by God to have his Son as a family member and to educate him. We rejoice because in order to become man, God needed a family and a home where he could learn, as we had to learn, to become human. We thank God who chose to become a child and to be cared for as a child. We thank God also that there was someone like Joseph who agreed to act as father and to educate a son who was not his own.

13 When the Wise Men had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." 19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 20 "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." 21 And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. 23 And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

I. READ: UNDERSTAND WHAT THE TEXT IS SAYING, FOCUSING ON HOW IT SAYS IT

With this episode Matthew closes the so-called infancy narrative. It is the harbinger of an even more dramatic end to his gospel. The passage we read in the liturgy skips over the story of the infanticide planned by Herod and focuses instead on Joseph as a genuine family man who takes responsibility for the welfare of the child and his mother.

After the wise men had come from the East to adore the Child in Bethlehem, the story continues. God the Father acts to save his Son by freeing him from Herod through the intervention of Joseph.

Nothing that has to do with the child and his mother is the result of chance or human malice; everything follows a precise divine plan. The two scenes that make up the story begin with the same expression: *the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph*. Everything that happened in that family was foreseen and foretold by the prophets: danger of death and forced exile, a return to Israel and change of residence, all in fulfilment of what the prophets had foretold.

Joseph receives precise orders in his sleep, not once but twice (Mt 2,13.19.22). The manner of communication does not make the command less authoritative or the divine instructions any less demanding. The whole of the angel's revelation is in the imperative; rise, take the child, flee to Egypt, remain there ... This was how God had already spoken to Joseph obliging him to accept Mary as his wife, and her child (Mt 1:20-21). God spoke to Joseph in dreams from which he had to wake up and do what he had been told. Joseph rose, took the child, fled to Egypt and remained there without saying a word. Joseph offered no resistance, neither when he was asleep nor when he

was awake. In sleep he saw what he had to do. When he woke he got up and did what he was told. These were not his dreams but by fulfilling them he fulfilled what the prophets had foretold. Joseph's prompt obedience made it possible for God to keep his promises. Through Joseph's prompt obedience, God was able to 'save' the saviour.

And God saved his Son by an obedient father who took charge of the family and went into exile in Egypt. In this way it was clear, when the time came to go home, that the child Joseph had taken care of was the Son whom God had called out of Egypt. It should be noted that Joseph in his sleep knew only half the reason why he had to go to Egypt or when he would return to Israel. He knew that by going to Egypt he would save Mary's son, but he did not know that when they got back from Egypt, the son of Mary would be revealed as the Son of God. He knew that he could return from Egypt because he was notified of the death of Herod, but he did not know in advance that the life of the family was not safe in Judea and that he would have to move to Nazareth. If we want God to keep his promises, we do not have to know everything but only to obey immediately. When people are obedient, like Joseph, they help God to accomplish his salvation.

II. MEDITATION: APPLY WHAT THE TEXT SAYS TO LIFE

No sooner was Jesus born than he was in danger and his family threatened. Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth are three stages of a threatened childhood and a persecuted family. Even though the child enjoys divine protection, his parents had to flee into exile. Having a Son made the lives of his earthly parents more complicated. Intimacy with the Son of God did not spare them from having to obey God. They had God as their son but they allowed themselves to be guided by an angel, during sleep! The family of God does not enjoy a better life. Having God in the family did nothing but complicate his life. Why God found parents who were obedient, even at the cost of their lives, Jesus was able to reveal himself as the only Son of God.

We do not know whether to marvel more at God's ability to complicate the lives of his people, or God's apparent need to rely on a real family to reveal his Son to Israel. God decided to enter the world and to share his day to day life with two people who acted as his parents. He wanted his Son to experience Mary's motherly love and care for many years, and to submit to Joseph as his father and be protected by him. Jesus had no problem spending most of his life being recognised publicly as the son of Joseph and Mary. This is what it meant for God to be a member of a real family.

He really did not want to be a man without belonging to a family. The One who already had God as his Father, wanted to have a human mother and father like any child. In becoming man, God did not look for any special conditions. He was not born rich or famous. He was not desired before he was born and he was persecuted as soon as he was born. But on one thing did not give up - from the day he was born, he wanted to be a member of a family. To become familiar with the world of men, with their thoughts and feelings, he chose to live in a family. Like all of us, he knew in his heart bread and tears, daily sacrifice and daily affection, the few and always brief joys of human life and its long and inevitable sacrifices. Our God-made-man was born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary, but it was in Nazareth, in the bosom of his family, that he became man. To be born, God needed a virgin who believed and a husband who obeyed, but to become a man he had to live for a long time as a child in a family.

The incarnation would have been frustrated if he had not found a family where he could become mature and learn to live as a man. We are indebted to God that as Jesus of Nazareth he chose to become one of us, and we have just thanked him for that. We are indebted also to his family, to Mary and Joseph, and now we have the opportunity to thank them for accepting God as a child and

caring for him until he became a man. Without the family of Nazareth, God could not have become Jesus, God-with-us. The family of Nazareth was the home and school of humanity for God.

It is not enough just to marvel at the fact that God chose to have a family, or that he found a family where God was able to grow up as man. To celebrate this feast properly, we should also review our family life and ask why God is absent and we are lacking so much in humanity. How does it happen that in our busy family life, we experience the absence of the same God who became our relative within the family of Nazareth? How do we explain that our Christian families who celebrate the incarnation of God every year, do not become more human every Christmas, more loving, more affectionate towards family members, when we know that God learned humanity and received affection in the bosom of a family? How do we expect to celebrate the fact that God wanted to have a family, if we do not experience our family as something divine, like the home where God dwelt or the school where he learnt to live as his children live?

It's not easy at the present time to have a better quality of family life and at the same time to become more familiar with our God. We live in a society where people live by their diary to the detriment of family life. Those who break with family life are often seen as heroes, and they boast about the supposed maturity of those who refuse to take responsibility for the people who love them. Fatherhood is no longer regarded by some as important or necessary and children suffer as a consequence. Parents today accuse their children of misunderstanding and repay them with further misunderstanding. Children neglect their parents in their old age because they do not appreciate those who gave their lives for them.

Christians who do not safeguard their family life or who abandon their family are putting their life of faith at risk. Joseph saved his son by abandoning his country and his townspeople, not by leaving his family. It is no coincidence that the disintegration of the family, a phenomenon increasingly present in our world today, coincides with a certain dehumanization of our society and with an experience of God that is becoming weaker even among believers. For Christians, the family is the place where humanity is learned and finds meaning, and the home is the place where we learn to feel loved by God.

It certainly was not easy for Joseph being head of the family of God, but he kept the family united and guarded his son, never losing sight of his God. If we really want to celebrate the Holy Family of Nazareth, we should devote ourselves to defence of the sacredness of family life. This is the only way we can thank God for giving us his Son in the family of Mary and Joseph. We place ourselves in the hands of our God, the Son of a family of Nazareth, and we pledge ourselves to defend what we value most - the family that God has given us. This is how believers should celebrate Christmas!