

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY C

I haven't always looked forward to the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Family. As a boy growing up, I heard a sermon every year on the virtues of *'the holy family of Nazareth'* which left me feeling that my good but imperfect family was simply not in the same league.

Pictures and statues of the Holy Family only reinforced the distance I felt between their family and mine. In their simple but immaculate home, there was a place for everything and everything in its place. Joseph, Mary and Jesus seemed so calm and peaceful and unruffled. They looked like they never had an argument, a disagreement, or even a misunderstanding. They didn't seem to have any money worries or any fears for their safety or their future or anything else. Fortunately the bible stories about the childhood of Jesus tell us something quite different and bring us down to earth with a thud. This is particularly true with today's story about the loss of the child Jesus.

Many of you are parents. No doubt you've had the anguish of losing a child, if only for a few minutes. The child was with you at the shopping centre. You turned round for a moment to look at something in a window or on a shelf, and when you turned back, your little one had wandered off, without a trace. You felt as if your heart was going to break. You felt real fear for their safety. In your panic you might even have thought your precious little one might have been stolen from you.

Jesus goes missing for much longer, for three whole days. If this happened today, his parents might have been charged with child neglect. How could it have happened? In those days, the men on pilgrimage walked with the men, and the women with the women. Only in the evening would the two groups come together. It seemed that Mary assumed that the boy was travelling with his father, and Joseph assumed that the boy was with his mother. A case of family misunderstanding! After travelling a whole day, then, Joseph and Mary discover that their child has gone off on his own. They go looking for him all along the road back to Jerusalem. Only two days later do they find him in the Temple of the city, sitting with the teachers, listening to them and questioning them.

The text says they were *'overcome'* when they saw him? I wonder what exactly that word *'overcome'* means. Were they crying? Were they annoyed? Were they angry? What Mary says to him suggests they were exasperated: *'My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.'* His reply does nothing to reassure them and settle them down: *'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?'* We're told that *'they did not understand what he meant.'* Maybe his words even came across to them as a bit of brat behaviour, a cheeky back-answer from a precocious child!

When I focus on the details of what Luke actually tells us in his stories of the child Jesus, and when I read the bits between the lines, I can feel quite close to the Holy Family of Nazareth. They are real people, after all. They had their ups and downs as a family, just like your family and mine. They had their problems, they had their struggles, and they had their challenges, just like your family and mine. But they survived as a family, just like yours and mine. They

survived, because there was enough love, enough acceptance, and enough forgiveness left in their relationships, and enough trust in both God and one another.

In conclusion, let me illustrate this with a true story about how one particular family faced a real challenge which came their way. I quote the mother's actual words (as she has published them):

Our youngest daughter became pregnant (out of wedlock) and for our family this last twelve months was make-or-break time, emotionally, physically and faith-wise. But with God's help and grace we have all come through this crisis in one piece. From anger to acceptance. From disappointment to unconditional love. From betrayal to peace. From hurt to holding this precious baby, the joy of all our lives now. God certainly moves in mysterious ways, and while this is not how we wanted to have our grandchildren, this little child of God is loved by all.

bgleesoncp@gmail.com