

Holy Family Sunday, Year B

This Sunday there is a choice for the first two readings and in each case I have chosen the first. There is, however, only one Gospel.

It is in the widest sense of family that we see the true meaning of today's feast. The Creator of all human beings became a human being—uniting us to each other in the most intimate and inclusive family ever known in human history. The Latin root of the word is famulus, which means servant. In every human relationship described by the word “family,” there is always the implication or hint that the people in that family serve one another. They make life better for each other. They support each other, nourish each other, protect each other, love each other.² The introduction to the Lectionary tells us that the first two readings on the feast of the Holy family were chosen to disclose the virtues of family life (#95). The family virtue of faithfulness is at the heart of this dialogue.⁷

Genesis 15: 1-6, 21:1-3.

1The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying: “Fear not, Abram! I am your shield; This would imply that God would protect and defend him. It is interesting that the shield for the Christian in spiritual warfare is faith (Ephesians 6:16). Faith is such a significant part of Abraham in verse 6. **I will make your reward very great.**”

2But Abram said, “O Lord God, what good will your gifts be, if I keep on being childless In Abram’s time, having a multitude of descendants was considered the greatest possible blessing. Abram must have wondered why he seemed to be cursed. His journeys to Egypt and other places made him very wealthy, but it was all meaningless if he had no son to carry on his name.⁹ **and have as my heir the steward of my house, Eliezer?**” It was socially and legally acceptable at the time for childless parents to appoint as their heir either an adopted son or the child of a concubine.¹¹

3Abram continued, “See, you have given me no offspring, and so one of my servants will be my heir.”

4Then the word of the Lord came to him: “No, that one shall not be your heir; your own issue shall be your heir.” God rejects the possibility of adopting Eliezer in order to have an heir and instead states that Abram shall father a son.¹¹

5The Lord took Abram outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so,” he added, “shall your descendants be.” This is the first friendly dialogue the Bible records between God and a man since the dialogue God had with Adam in paradise (3:9-12). It is a conversation between friends and the first example of a prayer of friendship and filiation (relationship of a son to a father), for to pray is to speak to God.⁴

6Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness. This means that Abram was in right relationship with the Lord for Abram’s faith was in the Lord’s promise and this outweighed his human concerns.⁷ In between where this verse leaves off and where we rejoin the narrative in Chapter 21, Abram sires a son through Sari’s maidservant Hagar who is also rejected by God, thus rejecting the second possibility of creating an heir through a concubine.¹¹

21:1The Lord took note of Sarah as he had said he would; he did for her as he had promised.

2Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time that God had stated. Isaac was born only through the intervention of God. Isaac’s birth was impossible in merely human terms as Sarah was 90 and barren, and Abraham was 100! ⁸

3Abraham gave the name Isaac The name means “she began to laugh” which is now interpreted as “God has made laughter for me”, that is, has made me happy.⁴ **to this son of his whom Sarah bore**

him. Note the name changes (Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah). By doing so, God conferred a new personality and a new mission on them.⁴ Name changes in ancient times signified a new way of life—that the person was heading in a new direction.⁷ Some linguists suggest that there is another significance as well for *Abram* was an East Semitic form of the name, a form that Abram would have used in Ur. *Abraham* was the West Semitic form of the same name. By taking the western form of the name, Abraham showed the world that he belonged permanently in Canaan, the land in the west that God had given him.⁹

Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

This letter was written to a people who are steeped in the Old Testament, people who in all probability are converts from Judaism, and who may previously have even been priests or Levites. After becoming Christians, because of the persecutions of the time, they had to abandon Jerusalem and seek refuge in some coastal city such as Caesarea or Antioch. To bolster their sagging faith, the sacred writer reminds them that final salvation can only happen after death, when man sees God face-to-face. Chapter 11, from which our reading for today comes, gives an impressive account of the saints of the Old Testament, who were men of heroic faith, confident of the day when the divine promises would be fulfilled. Our reading for today concentrates on the faith of Abraham.⁽¹¹⁾ Like the first reading, this one shows forth virtues of family life in that it recounts the experience of Abraham and Sarah in faith.⁷

Brothers and sisters:

8By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. Abraham's faith is exemplified by his obedience to God's command to migrate to Canaan (Genesis 12:1, 4).

11By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age—and Sarah herself was sterile—for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy. The conception of Isaac is also a "type" of that of Christ. "All the miraculous conceptions which occurred in the Old Testament were prefigurements of the greatest of all miracles, the Incarnation of the Word. It was fitting that his birth from a Virgin should be prefigured by other births so as to prepare people's minds for faith. But there is this difference: God miraculously enabled Sarah to conceive by means of human seed, whereas the blessed Virgin conceived without it.⁵

12So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore. The faith of Sarah and her husband can be said to exceed that of the earlier patriarchs because what God promised could come true only by means of a miracle, since Abraham, like his wife, was old and incapable of begetting children. That is why it says that from one man "and him as good as dead" innumerable descendants were born.⁵

17By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, God tested Abraham's faith but he did not do it to prove to Himself the Patriarch's virtue. Rather, he did it to show the world how excellent Abraham was and so that anyone who is afflicted should not think that God has abandoned him.⁵

18of whom it was said, "Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name." Abraham's readiness to offer Isaac in sacrifice is particularly striking because his hopes for the fulfillment of God's promise were bound up with Isaac.¹¹ It is interesting to note that three great religions of the world claim Abraham as Father but while the Jews and Christians think that he was willing to offer up Isaac as

a sacrifice, the Muhammadans think that he was willing to offer up Ishmael—although the Quran never mentions the name of the sacrificial child.¹²

19He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol. Isaac's escape from death (Gen 22:9-12) on the third day after God decreed it (Gen 22:4) prefigures the third-day Resurrection of Jesus.¹⁰ This is the most powerful line in the reading because the writer of Hebrews understands the faith of Abraham to prefigure Christ's Resurrection.⁷

Luke 2:22-40

Joseph and Mary are portrayed in this reading as fulfilling the requirements of the Law, particularly two customs: the purification of the mother and the redemption of the first-born (though there is no mention of the payment usually required for the second ritual).⁸

22When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, The birth of a male child disqualifies an Israelite woman from touching any holy object or approaching the Temple for 40 days, after which time she must offer sacrifice in Jerusalem (Lev 12:1-8). Strictly speaking, these offerings cleanse women of legal impurity and have no connection with moral failures or guilt. Several Church Fathers hold that Mary had no legal impurity to atone for. She nevertheless conformed herself to the Mosaic Law to avoid scandalizing others. Her submission was similar to that of Jesus, who was sinless yet received John's baptism of repentance.¹

23just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord," The point is that Mary and Joseph were obedient to the law in consecrating their firstborn to the Lord.²

24and to offer the sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord. Rather than a year-old lamb, Mary and Joseph give the "offering of the poor"; one bird was for a holocaust of adoration, the other for a sin offering.¹¹

25Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, According to rabbinical tradition, the "consolation of Israel" was the final, unrecorded words that passed between Elijah and Elisha and that this would be made known when Elijah reappeared.¹¹ Many believed that this would be the time when Yahweh would rescue his people from Gentile rule and reestablish the glorious kingdom of David in Jerusalem. These hopes were linked with the coming Messiah.¹ and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

26It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord. "the Christ" means "the anointed one."⁶

27He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him,

28she took him into his arms The rabbis normally took children into their arms in order to bless them.¹¹ But here he took the child into his arms and blessed God! and blessed God, saying:

29"Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, Simeon is the watchman released from duty. He was most probably a member of, or at least was closely associated with, the Sadducee group and must have waited amid great suffering as he witnessed the priestly betrayal of many sacred obligations.¹¹

30for my eyes have seen your salvation,

31which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,

32a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.” Simeon’s words form the theological core of the passage; he proclaims the significance of Christ’s birth. Then in verse 34 he speaks of Christ’s destiny, indicating the conflict and suffering that will mark his ministry.⁸ Having seen the glory, Simeon can die peacefully.¹¹

33The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; The goals and goodness, preached and lived by the Messiah, force all men to face up to their great sinfulness. This knowledge can completely destroy, as it does the proud; or it can prompt the humble to turn to the Messiah and through him to rise to a new life. Everywhere else in Luke the Greek word translated as rise is used exclusively for resurrection from the dead.¹¹

34and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted” Simeon’s words cast a shadow over the Child’s future. He is the Messiah who will draw a line in the sand of Israel, causing the nation to divide itself by taking a stand for or against him. Those who reject him stand self-condemned, while those who embrace him will be blessed.¹

35—and you yourself a sword will pierce—so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” The words Simeon addresses to Mary announce that she will be intimately linked with her Son’s redemptive work. The sword indicates that Mary will have a share in her Son’s sufferings; hers will be an unspeakable pain which pierces her soul. Our Lord suffered on the cross for the sins of all mankind, and it is those sins which forge the sword of Mary’s pain.¹¹

36There was also a prophetess, Anna, Anna is a recognized interpreter of God’s will for Israel.¹ the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage,

37and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. Anna’s testimony is very similar to Simeon’s; like him, she too has been awaiting the coming of the Messiah her whole life, in faithful service to God, and she too is rewarded with the joy of seeing him. The birth of Jesus the Christ was revealed by three kinds of witness in three different ways: 1) by the shepherds, after the angel’s announcement; 2) by the magi, who were guided by the star; and 3) by Simeon and Anna who were inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹¹

38And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. Anna becomes the first evangelist, speaking about the child “to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.”⁸

39When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Before their return to Nazareth, Saint Matthew tells us that the Holy Family fled to Egypt where they stayed for some time (Matthew 2:13-23).

40The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. This final verse describes Jesus as growing and learning like any child—a reminder that he is truly human, like us in all things but sin.⁸

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke,” (2) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year B: 2005” by Aelred R. Rosser, (3) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (4) “The Navarre Bible: Pentateuch” (5) “The Navarre Bible: Hebrews,” (6) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, (7) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year B: 2009” by Mary A. Eble, (8) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year B: 1997” by Lawrence E. Mick, (9) “Understanding The Scriptures: A Complete Course On Bible Study” by Scott Hahn, (10) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter to the Hebrews” with Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch,” and (11) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online Founded by Dr. Scott Hahn.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.