

GOSPEL

LUKE 2:22-40

When the day came for them to be purified as laid down by the Law of Moses, the parents of Jesus took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord - observing what stands written in the Law of the Lord: Every first-born male must be consecrated to the Lord - and also to offer in sacrifice, in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Now in Jerusalem there was a man named Simeon. He was an upright and devout man; he looked forward to Israel's comforting and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord. Prompted by the Spirit he came to the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the Law required, he took him into his arms and blessed God; and he said:

'Now, Master, you can let your servant go in peace, just as you promised;

because my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel.'

As the child's father and mother stood there wondering at the things that were being said about him, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected - and a sword will pierce your own soul too - so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.'

There was a prophetess also, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well on in years. Her days of girlhood over, she had been married for seven years before becoming a widow. She was now eighty-four years old and never left the Temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayer. She came by just at that moment and began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.

When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Meanwhile the child grew to maturity, and he was filled with wisdom; and God's favour was with him.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

On this first Sunday after Christmas, we are celebrating the Holy Family of Nazareth, and the Gospel invites us to reflect on the

experience lived by Mary, Joseph and Jesus, as they grow together as a family in mutual love and in trust in God. The rite performed by Mary and Joseph, in offering their son Jesus to God, is an expression of this trust. The Gospel states: "they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" as Mosaic Law required. Jesus' parents go to the Temple to attest that their son belongs to God and that they are the guardians of his life, and not the owners. And this leads us to reflect. All parents are guardians of their children's lives, not the owners, and they must help them to grow, to mature.

This gesture emphasizes that God alone is the Lord of individual and family history; everything comes to us from him. Each family is called to acknowledge this primacy, by protecting and educating children to open themselves to God who is the very source of life. From here passes the secret of inner youth, paradoxically witnessed in the Gospel by an elderly couple, Simeon and Anna. The elderly Simeon, in particular, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says in regard to the Child Jesus: "this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against [...] that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed".

These prophetic words reveal that Jesus has come to tear down the false images that we make of God and also of ourselves; to "speak against" the worldly certainties on which we insistently rely; to make ourselves "rise" to a true human and Christian journey, founded on the values of the Gospel. There is no family situation that is precluded from this new journey of rebirth and resurrection. Each time that families — even those that are wounded and marked by frailty, failures and difficulties — return to the source of the Christian experience, new roads and unexpected opportunities open.

Today's Gospel narrative recounts that when Mary and Joseph "had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee to their own city, Nazareth. And the child grew" — the Gospel says — "and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him". Children's growth is a great joy for the family, we all know it. They are destined to grow and become strong, to acquire knowledge and receive the grace of God, just as happened to Jesus. He is truly one of us: the Son of God becomes a child, agrees to grow, to become strong; he is filled with knowledge, and the grace of God is upon him. Mary and Joseph have the joy of seeing all this in their son; and this is the mission to which the family is directed: to create

conditions favourable to the harmonious and full growth of its children, so they may live a good life, worthy of God and constructive for the world.

This is the wish that I offer all the families today, with the accompanying invocation to Mary, Queen of the Family.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In what ways did your family life impact your life of faith and openness to God's will and purpose?
- Pope Francis suggests that all parents are guardians of their children's lives, not the owners, and they must help them to grow, to mature. What has or does this mean for you in relation to your own family life?
- How does the knowing that Jesus himself was part of a family and went through the everyday struggles of life impact your own life and faith?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the 'Glory Be' or similar prayer.