

The Holy Family, Year A

GOSPEL

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After the wise men had left, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother with you, and escape into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you, because Herod intends to search for the child and do away with him.' So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt, where he stayed until Herod was dead. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet:

I called my son out of Egypt.

After Herod's death, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother with you and go back to the land of Israel, for those who wanted to kill the child are dead.' So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, went back to the land of Israel. But when he learnt that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as ruler of Judaea he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he left for the region of Galilee. There he settled in a town called Nazareth. In this way the words spoken through the prophets were to be fulfilled:

'He will be called a Nazarene.'

(Matthew 2:13-15,19-23)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Matthew often presents Jesus as the new Moses. There are many parallels in this text: a threat of death at birth, an escape, being called out of Egypt and being under the special protection of God.
- After the death of Herod the Great, his kingdom was divided between three of his sons: Archelaus, Herod Antipas (who ruled Galilee and was the Herod mentioned at Jesus' death) and Philip. All these men ruled only as regents under Rome, which held the real power.
- In Matthew's Gospel, Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem rather than at Nazareth in Galilee. Bethlehem is in Judaea, not far from Jerusalem, and thus comes under the rule of Archelaus.
- Archelaus proved to be an inept ruler and was stripped of his power by Rome. Judaea was instead placed under direct Roman rule through a Roman governor. Pontius Pilate was such a governor.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Again we see a communication from God, through a dream, and an angel leading Joseph into risky and dangerous behaviour. Such a journey in the first century—across the desert of Sinai—would have been a long and arduous trek. Again, Joseph's response to God's command is made with absolute trust and confidence. The parallels with the story of Moses are obvious.

- Read the opening three chapters of Exodus and trace the parallels.

It was well established in the early church and from contemporary Roman sources that Jesus was known as a Nazarene, so Matthew uses the device of Archelaus, a son of Herod the Great and an inept and evil ruler, to explain how the Holy Family came to live in Nazareth. The protection Joseph offers to his fledgling family is paralleled with the protection God offers to this child who is God's Son. Mary and Joseph provide a positive model for all parents who selflessly risk all for their child.

- How is love, concern and protection expressed in your family?
- What are some of the sacrifices that you make as a parent or that have been made for you by your parents?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Are there situations or people in your life that it is more sensible to escape from than to confront?
- What in your life poses the biggest threat to your faith journey?
- How far are you willing to go to safeguard your faith?
- In what ways has the family within which you grew to maturity influenced the sort of person you have become? What, ultimately, would you like to think you had contributed to your own family? Share your reflections.
- Make special times for family this week. Contemplate the richness of family life.
- At this time in human history, when so many people find themselves forced to flee their homes, pray this week for all who are refugees:

God of all, you called your Son out of Egypt.

Watch over all who are fleeing death or persecution.

Open our hearts to their plight.

May we give the protection that your Son received.

NOTES

The feast of the Holy Family is a relatively new one in the Church's calendar. It was instituted in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV to counter anti-family policies and trends in modern society. But the tradition of honouring Mary and Joseph as the earthly family of Jesus has a much longer history. While this feast provides us with an opportunity to reflect on family life and its importance for our growth and maturity, that is not its only strength. Coming as it does within the Christmas cycle, it is a time to continue reflection on the reality of God's incarnation in the human story. Jesus was born into a human family whose members are models of steadfast and committed service to God. We are not only members of our human family but also members of God's family, and this brings responsibilities with it.

- ## SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Just as Moses was called out of Egypt to bring life to the people, so also does Jesus bring life to all those who accept him. Just as the great saving event of Passover delivered the Hebrews from slavery, so too does the great Passover of Jesus' sacrifice deliver all believers from slavery to sin and death.

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting
Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and
environment

- In what ways does your community celebrate families or offer opportunities for families to grow in faith together?
- You could invite participants to bring photographs of their families as a focus for prayer. Pray for you own family and especially for families who are struggling with conflict. A suitable song might be 'This is my will' (GA 465). Conclude with the prayer of exorcism in *RCIA* at §94F.