

Feast of the Holy Family – B

St. Luke is one of the great storytellers of all time. He weaves the elements of what he has come to know about Jesus into a narrative that engages us because we can place ourselves in it and identify with the characters and make them our own.

Christmas is one of the most beloved stories ever told. It's the story of a God who loves each one of us so much that he is willing to enter into the human experience and "pitch his tent among us," as one translation puts it., dwelling among us, dining with us, rejoicing with us, crying with us, bleeding with us, triumphing with us.

In today's Gospel, we see how St. Luke takes the story of the birth of Jesus to another level. He introduces Jesus to the community of faith that Mary and Joseph are a part of. The story now becomes a story that expands out from the family of father, mother, child to the larger world of the Jewish community, and all of society. And when that happens things cannot remain all sweetness and light, like we like to have them, like the scene of Mary and Joseph and Jesus in the manger might let us think of them.

Notice that within the beauty of this story, Simeon, the representative of the entire history of the Jewish faith, takes the child Jesus into his arms, turns to Mary, and says to her: "You yourself a sword will pierce." Gone from this scene are the angels singing "Glory to God in the highest." Gone are the shepherds and their wonder and amazement. Gone is the serenity of the manger scene.

Feast of the Holy Family – B

Instead, a note of darkness enters the story: a sword, a weapon. We don't see any evidence in the gospels that Mary was literally pierced by a sword, so we need to understand the symbolism of such an image. How will Mary be pierced? A traditional response to that question has been to think of Mary as Our Lady of Sorrows who shares in her son's suffering. We know without a doubt that Mary did that.

But Luke might have other things in mind as well. In the bible, image of swords piercing people's often does not refer to physical or even psychological suffering. It has more to do with the Word of God cutting through all the ambiguity in one's life to get to the heart of a matter: What God was doing in someone's life, and their willingness to follow through on what they came to discover.

As much as predicting sorrow Simeon is also telling Mary that the Word of God, her Son, will be a handful. His presence will require everyone to make a choice for or against what God is doing in the world.

When Jesus began his public ministry it quickly became controversial. And Mary and Jesus' family were confronted with a decision: Do they commit to faith in him, now that it has become clearer what being the Son of God and Messiah of his people means? Mark's gospel includes an episode where some of Jesus relatives come to get him and take him home because they think he has gone off the deep end. Mary is with them, although we don't know exactly how to interpret her presence there.

Feast of the Holy Family – B

Luke makes that clearer as the story continues to unfold and we find Mary staying true, at the foot of the cross, and in the upper room on Pentecost.

The feast of the Holy Family was established as a response to what the Church saw as the dangers to family life that modern society contained. But a deeper question for families, one that has echoes in the Gospel itself, is what to do when the sword of discernment pierces us in our family living.

There can be those moments when we are confronted with a decision to follow Christ more closely, perhaps even in ways that go beyond the accepted family tradition.

Or when we come face to face with the fact that our adult children have chosen a way of living that we have little experience with, and maybe little stomach for.

And it doesn't have to be a religious vocation, per se. It could be the call to do mission work abroad as a lay person, or to pick a career that does not pay much but is concentrated on service to the poor and those on the margins.

There's a sword there, too, waiting to pierce the heart, to cut between joints and marrow and require a decision.

Feast of the Holy Family – B

The Feast of the Holy Family is only generally capable of providing us with an example to follow. We know too little about the whole scene in Bethlehem and Nazareth.

But we do know that, like Mary and Joseph, the choice to follow God is not done once and for all, but calls for constant discernment and the willingness to say “yes” again and again.

We pray for the intercession of the Holy Family that when the sword of discernment and decision enters into the life of a family and cannot be ignored. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph know first-hand the drama that family life contains. We can count on their help in exercising right judgment and wisdom, gifts of the Holy Spirit, in choosing rightly the path that leads to life.