

HOLY FAMILY - A

Just a couple of days ago we celebrated the coming of our Lord into the messiness of human history.

God has always had a way of using the unexpected to accomplish his will.

Consider Abraham and Sarah, an elderly, childless couple in whom God plants the seed of the chosen people of Israel.

You could also say that God has worked out the divine plan of salvation, writing straight with the crooked lines of human foibles and sin.

Although we rightly think of the Holy Family as the perfect example of domestic life, there are several questionable figures in the family tree of Jesus.

There is Abraham's son Isaac who steals the birthright of his elder brother Esau.

Isaac's son Jacob marries the harlot Rahab, and the great-grandmother of King David was a foreigner.

And just think of the very imperfect David who killed off his chief general so that he could get away with sleeping with the man's wife.

God writes straight with crooked ... or at least very unconventional ... lines throughout salvation history.

Even the circumstances of the birth of Jesus - as wondrous as it was - contains the unexpected and somewhat confusing fact of a virgin birth.

Joseph was certainly confused by it all until the angel explained it to him in a dream.

And just think of Mary's parents ... they were probably embarrassed by it all.

After the birth of Jesus the unexpected just keeps coming.

Within eight days, at his circumcision, his parents are told that Jesus is going to be a sign that is contradicted and that a sword will pierce his Mother's heart.

The Holy Family are considered enemies of the state and the life of the infant Jesus is put in jeopardy.

They become migrants settling in Egypt as refugees, and sometime after they return to Judea, before Jesus leaves home to begin his public ministry, Joseph dies.

We say that Jesus, Mary and Joseph were the model of a holy family life.

One way that "holiness" can be defined is, "Cooperating with God's grace so to remain faithful when things get tough or don't turn out the way we expected them to.

It all comes down to trust ... trust that God is in control.

If we are humble enough to admit our weakness and our dependence upon God's grace, adversity becomes the crucible in which virtue is tested and strengthened.

And we need to remember that holiness is not limited to heroic souls alone ... each of us is called to live a holy life.

3

In his recent reflection on the call to holiness Pope Francis observed:

"Very often holiness is found in our next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence. We might call them 'the middle class of holiness.'"

You and I are each part of that "middle class" trying one day at a time, to cooperate with God's merciful grace through small gestures of faithfulness and love.

Even our mistakes are pathways to holiness if we allow God to "write straight with the crooked lines" of our failures.

And as we come to know the mercy of God, we become more merciful ourselves.

St. Paul write about the qualities essential to life in any family - our own as well as the human family at large:

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness ... held together by the bond of love and clothes in the peace of Christ.

And, of course, thankfulness ... living in the spirit of gratitude to God.

These are the high goals we aim for with the assistance of God's grace which catches us in the arms of mercy when we fall short.

This is what it means to live as a "holy family" whatever our family might look like, turning often to the prayers of the Holy Family for inspiration and help.