

Feast of the Holy Family, Year B
Gen 15:1-6, 21:1-3
Ps 105 *passim*
Heb 11:8, 11-12, 17-19
Lk 2:22-40

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Merry Christmas! I'm sure I don't need to remind you that Christmas is more, so much more, than a single day. It's a season of the liturgical calendar, and we will be in the Christmas season until Monday, January 8, when the Church will celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. So, I say it again: Merry Christmas! And best wishes for a happy and holy new year.

This Sunday between Christmas and New Year's is observed as the Feast of the Holy Family. I'm going to offer you a few thoughts on the Holy Family and then I'll conclude with a parable by Father Tony de Mello.

The first chapter of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, tells a story about creation. It's the story of God performing the work of creation day by day. And at points along the way, God steps back to take a look at his handiwork and say, "Wow! It is good! It is very good." According to Genesis, human beings hold a very special place in creation, because only human beings have been created in the image and likeness of God.

We usually say that what marks us out, different from the whole rest of creation, as bearing the image and likeness of God is our capacity to know and to understand, which we call intelligence, and our capacity to choose and to love, which we call free will. And that is true, so far as it goes. But this Feast of the Holy Family reminds us that there is another, very important way in which we are created in God's image and likeness. We are designed to grow up, to come to adulthood, and to mature fully, in a community we call the family. The last verse I proclaimed from today's Gospel was, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him." I am nostalgic for the beautiful old translation from my childhood: "And the child Jesus grew in wisdom and age and grace before God and man." The incubator for that wisdom, age, and grace was the family in which Jesus grew up. In principle, the same is true for all of us. At its best, then, ideally, the family is an image of the Holy Trinity – one God consisting of three Divine Persons each possessing the same divine nature. The Trinity is a community of self-giving love, each Divine Person pouring himself out to each of the other two Persons, in an eternal outpouring of love.

To the extent we grow in wisdom and age and grace, we too are called to spend our lives pouring ourselves out in self-giving love.

This brings us to the parable I wish to leave you with. Anthony de Mello was a Jesuit priest. He was from India and died in 1987, at the age of 55. His special gift and ministry was storytelling. He collected stories. He wrote stories. And like Jesus Fr. Tony told stories, stories that oftentimes were wake-up calls. This parable is one of those stories.

On a rocky seacoast, where shipwrecks were frequent, there was once a ramshackle little life-saving station. It was no more than a hut and there was only one boat, but the few people who manned the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch over the sea and, with little regard for themselves and their own safety, went fearlessly out in a storm if they had any evidence that there had been a shipwreck somewhere. Many lives were thus saved and the station became famous.

As the fame of the station grew, so did the desire of people in the neighborhood to associate themselves with its excellent work. They generously offered of their time and money, and as a result new members were enrolled, new boats bought, and new crews trained. The hut too was replaced by a comfortable building which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea and, of course, since shipwrecks do not occur every day, it became a popular gathering place – a sort of local club.

As time passed the members became so engaged in socializing that they had little interest in life-saving, though they duly sported the life-saving motto on the badges they wore. As a matter of fact, when some people were actually rescued from the sea, it was always such a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and they soiled the carpeting and the furniture.

Soon the social activities of the club became so numerous and the life-saving activities so few that there was a showdown at a club meeting, with some members insisting that they return to their original purpose and activity. A vote was taken and these trouble-makers, who proved to be a small minority, were invited to leave the club and start another.

Which is precisely what they did – a little farther down the coast, with such selflessness and daring that, after a while, their heroism made them famous. Whereupon their membership was enlarged, their hut was reconstructed . . . , and their idealism was smothered. If you happen to visit that area today you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Each one of them is justifiably proud of its origin and its traditions. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts, but nobody seems to care much.

Anthony de Mello, S.J., *The Prayer of the Frog: A Book of Study Meditations*, vol. 1.