

Dear Friends,

There is a program on various national TV channels called “Who do you think you are? which aims you think you are?” Its aim is to help well-known personalities delve into their family backgrounds, highlighting the most interesting discoveries. In the British version of the program, it has proved possible to trace more than one family back to medieval monarchs. More unusual episodes are when expectations are turned upside down. A black woman returning to the Caribbean was surprised to find a black ancestor who owned slaves rather than being a slave himself. Moreover, most of the local population were still named after him. An actress knew that her family was of Irish stock, and her anti-Catholic mother was of the firm belief that they were members of the Anglo-Irish gentry whose name they bore. However, the research team discovered that they were in fact descendants of Irish Catholic Travelers who had taken the name of local gentry on emigrating to England, as they thought it would help more in their acceptance and settling down in their new home. The actress could not wait to inform her mother, whose reaction to the news was not recorded.

What would be the response if we asked the same question of Jesus and his family? Joseph is absent from the public life of Jesus, leading commentators to presume his death. All the synoptic evangelists depict Mary as visiting Jesus with relatives pointing out that his true family are his followers. St. John, however, portrays Mary in a very different role. She is the one who propels Jesus into his public life at the marriage feast of Cana. She stands at the foot of the cross at the end of her son’s life. Jesus gives Mary into the care of the beloved disciple, with whom, according to tradition, she will spend the rest of her days.

The Holy Family has commonly been used as an ideal example of the nuclear family. As we can see from the above examples from scripture, this idea may mislead us. The Holy Family went thru the same trials and misunderstandings that affect any family then and now. What is helpful for us is to see how they reacted in such demanding circumstances. Throughout their lives, their guiding star was a strong belief in, and dependence on, God, the reference point to whom they all turned.

Secondly, particularly in Mary and Joseph, we are given clear examples of parents who care. This care is shown in the way they fulfil the religious traditions on behalf of their soon, keeping him out of harm’s way and bringing him up in love and kindness. He in turn accepts their authority and guidance, only differing when it comes to the question of his ultimate calling. At that point we have a sense of Jesus educating his parents in the demands of the role that God has given him. In modern terms, they negotiate, both sides honestly expressing their concerns, and then continue in harmony.

For the contemporary reader there is inevitably a desire to know more. Later, legends grew up about Jesus displaying magical powers, but such instances say more about later generations’ fascination with magic than about the intentions of the evangelists. The latter wish to show how all elements of the life of Jesus reveal him fulfilling the promises made to his people and extending those promises to the whole world. His family relations reveal that same truth, and we, in our turn, are called to try to express that truth in all aspects of our lives.

Wish Y’all A Happy New Year!

Your friend in Jesus
Msgr. Zach

