

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH - B

This feast is kept on the Sunday within the octave of Christmas when we think of the parents of Jesus now responsible for their young child. The gospel reading from Luke is the story of Mary's purification following the birth of Jesus and the parents present their child to the Lord, he being their first-born. Mary and Joseph are faithful in carrying out the Law of Moses. There follows the meeting with the devout man Simeon and the prophetess Anna both of whom speak of the child's future mission on earth. In the first reading we hear how Abram is to have an heir and be the father of a great family. In the second reading the author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds the Jewish Christians of Abraham's faith and the faith his wife Sarah.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Genesis the first book in the Bible and the first book of the Pentateuch, the five books of the Jewish Law. The book's origins are still uncertain, it speaks of mankind's beginnings, 1-composite of three documents, the Yahwist, (J), the Elohist, (E) and the Priestly, (P), that go to make up the book of Genesis whose authorship, although attributed to Moses, is unknown. The Yahwistic tradition has a lively and vivid style and although God is described in human terms the author has a deep sense of the divine. The Elohist tradition (*elohim* means God) is more sober in style with an exacting moral code and an insistence on the distance separating human beings from God. The Priestly tradition contributes laws and is particularly concerned with the organization of the sanctuary, with sacrifices and festivals and with the person of Aaron, the priest, and his descendants. This is the tradition of the priests of the Temple of Jerusalem. The Yahwist and Elohist were possibly written down in the reign of Solomon c.950 BC, whereas the Priestly was not codified until the Exile, 587-538, and added to the Pentateuch after the return from exile.

The reading, 15.1-6, 21.1.3 is in two parts, the second revealing the fulfillment of the promise made to Abram in the first part where God tells Abram not to be fearful, God will protect him and give him a great reward. Abram thinks it is a waste of time giving him a reward since he has no heir but God tells him he will have an heir and his descendants will be as numerous as the countless stars in the heavens. 'Abram put his faith in Yahweh and this was reckoned to him as uprightness.' In the second part Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son as God had promised Abram. Here we can see a parallel with the Annunciation story only here it is Abram who believes as a result of which the family of God has its beginning which Jesus by his birth and death will redeem and bring to the Father. We are children of Abram's faith.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 104.1-6,8-9, tells of the wonderful history of Israel. The first two verses tell of the Lord's deeds and we should constantly seek his face. In the third verse we are reminded that we are children of Abraham, sons of Jacob and in verse four that God does not forget his covenant with Abraham and the oath he swore to Isaac.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 11.8,11-12,17-19, tells of the exemplary faith of ancestors of the Israelites none more so than Abraham and his wife Sarah. The writer is trying to show the Jewish Christians who have been discouraged by persecution, that faith is more important than the observance of the Law of the OT: 'Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen.' The writer then goes on to give examples from the lives of the saints in the OT and our reading, following the first reading, speaks of Abraham and Sarah and their faith in God. For us faith in the descendant of Abraham, Jesus, is what is important for us today. Read chapter 11 if you have time to give you a fuller picture of the reading.