

we may grow in wisdom,
obedient to your word.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
in the splendour of eternal light,
God for ever and ever.

Opening prayers. Holy Family, Year B²

CPL • LBC Year B Holy Family.odt • 2020-11-22

² *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

The Holy Family

(Sunday between Christmas and New Year, or 30 December)

Principal Service readings

Isaiah 61.10 –62.3	Hymn of thanksgiving
Psalms 148 [or 148.7-14]	The praise of all creation
Galatians 4.4-7	Not slaves of God but sons and heirs
Luke 2.15-21	Shepherds visit the Holy Family; circumcision of Jesus

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Shepherds visit the Holy Family

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The circumcision of Jesus

²¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke 2.15-21 NRSV¹

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Comments and Questions

John's philosophical take on 'the word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1.14) becomes, in Luke's version, a very physical and tactile event with the stable, the manger and the shepherds. It is a very 'down to earth' birth, a lowly birth, in a temporary home. The angels, rejoicing on high, dazzle the shepherds with their news, and the shepherds hurry to see for themselves. Why shepherds? At the annunciation the angel came to Mary, a young woman who didn't count for anything, and asked her to do a special job: to give birth to the Messiah. The angels coming to the shepherds is similar: people who don't count for anything. Shepherds were on the edge of society, with a job that kept them out of town, as it were. There is also symbolism here. The 'son of David' was by tradition the shepherd of the flock of Israel (1 Samuel 16.11; 17.15; 2 Samuel 5.2), and his messianic successor was also (Jeremiah 3.15; Ezekiel 34.11-12; Micah 5.3).

Mary ponders what is said, as she reflects on her situation – being visited both by the angel and by the shepherds. She gets another message a little later, when she and Joseph take the child to the temple on the fortieth day (2.34-35), for Mary's purification according to the law (Leviticus 12.2-5).

The child is circumcised on the eighth day, according to the law (Genesis 17.12), and given the name 'Jesus', which means 'God saves'. This shows Mary and Joseph both following the law of Moses and the instruction of the angel.

Jesus, his mother, Mary, and his foster-father, Joseph, together make up the 'Holy Family'. We don't know very much about them before Jesus' public ministry as an adult. Apart from the birth, the circumcision and the presentation, there is an incident when Jesus was twelve, and was left behind after a family visit to Jerusalem for a festival; his parents go back to Jerusalem and find him in the temple, 'sitting among the teachers'. He goes back to Nazareth with them 'and remained subject to them'. Luke notes that 'His mother stored up all these things in her heart' (Luke 2.41-52).

Quotations

1

The Holy Family is the beginning of countless other holy families. The Council recalled that holiness is the vocation of all the baptized. In our age, as in the past, there is no lack of witnesses to the "gospel of the family", even if they are not well known or have not been proclaimed saints by the Church. The Year of the Family is the appropriate occasion to bring about an increased awareness of their existence and their great number.

Pope John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane* (Letter to Families), #23. 1994

2

What was family life in Nazareth like? In the home of the Holy Family in Nazareth, Jesus, Mary and Joseph sanctified their ordinary life, without doing anything spectacular or newsworthy. They led a life that was to all appearances, the same as that of their neighbours, a life that was important, not because of the material things they did but because of the love that they put into these things, in perfect union with the Will of God the Father.

St Josemaria Escrivá, 1902–1975. *Christ is passing by*, no. 22

Related topics

For further study:

Christian family; incarnation; manifestation; faith; salvation—soteriology; Law and Prophets

Closing Prayer

O God,
you cradle us at the beginning of life
and embrace us at our journey's end,
for you love us as your own.

Bind our families together
and deepen our faith,
that, like the Holy Family of Nazareth,