

DECEMBER 31, 2017

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Reading 1 [GN 15:1-6; 21:1-3](#)

[PS 105:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9](#)

R. (7a , 8a) **The Lord remembers his covenant for ever.**

[HEB 11:8, 11-12, 17-19](#)

Gospel [LK 2:22, 39-40](#)

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

HOMILY

Earlier this year, someone gave me the gift of one of those DNA analyses that determines from where one's ancestors came. While not very comprehensive, I have had somewhat the role of family historian, so I was curious. The results confirmed what I had expected from my research: Three centers of our family's origin: France (as in "French Canadian"), the British Isles (especially Ireland), and Nova Scotia, Canada (for my grandmother hailed from Nova Scotia).

In fact, some years ago, I had the chance to travel to her hometown, Yarmouth NS. Traveling to NS was a beautiful experience, and then to Yarmouth was an exciting, almost eerie experience of discovery, walking the streets where my grandmother was born, seeing the church where she was baptized, and then visiting the local historical society, where a genealogical office had been established, since so many immigrants came to the Western hemisphere through this formally large and vibrant seaport. At the museum, I found a newspaper clipping, from the *Yarmouth Depth Charge*, Nova Scotia, Canada newspaper of July 1942, which began: "JAMES SELVAGE: A familiar figure and highly respected citizen of Yarmouth South died at the home of his son John, Argyle Street, last Saturday. After an illness of many months Mr. Selvage failed to respond to medical treatment as his condition became depressed in recent weeks, and he passed away July 18th. . ." James Selvage, as it turned out, was the grandfather of my grandmother, my father's mother. The discovery of this obituary, with a rather brief recounting of the facts of his life (his birth, death, and career) was the beginning of the process through which I sought to fill in some details to the very murky history of my father's family. Growing up, we had never heard much about Dad's family. The trip to Nova Scotia was part of my efforts to shed some light on half my ancestors, and as a result shed some light on me.

Imagine my awe, then, when the director of the museum handed me two large folders, overflowing with artifacts and documents for the Bailey and Selvage families, my grandmother's parents' families, including the obituary of my Great-great Grandfather, James Selvage. Within just a couple of hours, my computer was filled with many details about ancestors, stretching back to the 18th century. But, in my estimation, it was **James Selvage** who held the key, the man whose obituary caught my attention. Further searching in the Selvage file uncovered a startling document, prepared by two of James' granddaughters, cousins of my grandmother, which revealed a great deal about my father's family's cautiousness about speaking of the family: "James was born in London, England and raised in Liverpool. He was later brought over [to Nova Scotia] by his Grandmother's

mother's brother to Yarmouth. The reason for the emigration is unknown, but a family rumour is that James' mom was a maid for a duke and was accosted by him. James was the product of this union and was spirited away by an uncle to prevent family disgrace. He settled in Yarmouth and married Matilda Muise, apparently of Acadian descent. Their family tombstone is in the Catholic cemetery in Yarmouth. However, because Matilda appears to have predeceased James, only her name appears. The children did not, for unknown reasons, enter his name later." A startling revelation of family secrets was right before my eyes, a clue to why the family never spoke much about its history—shame! Shame of a birth outside marriage, shame of a child whisked away to another country to avoid family disgrace. Even his family felt it easier, on some level, to forget this man when it came time for his burial, seemingly omitting his name from the family grave marker. All of this was a fact that my father's family never talked about. In fact, when reported to my father, he reported he had never heard this story.

In truth, all our families have long and rich histories, which, whether we like it or not, make us who we are: genetically, socially, morally, and behaviorally. Why such secrecy on my father's side? The file in the museum shed some possible light regarding the birth and emigration of my great-great grandfather James Selvage. What happened to him still affects our family today, some 150 years after his birth. And, what has happened across the course of your family's history still exerts powerful effect on you?

But. . . when we discover less than "holy" qualities among our families, on this Feast of the Holy Family, we need not despair. For, as it turns out, while we are all born, for better or worse, into each of our families, we have also been born into the Holy Family, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, by faith and the waters of baptism. This truth, begun with the promises to Abraham that a vast, holy family of God would be born of his ancestors, reached its fulfillment with the birth of Christ and the subsequent rebirths of all who have been joined to him in baptism. Because of this other family membership, as sons and daughters of God, we have another family that can exert powerful, positive influences on us! Each week, when our family, the Holy Family, gathers here, we hear about how we as a family are to live in the holy scriptures and then are reborn into the family in the Eucharist we share. While we could focus on each of our family's shortcomings, rather let's focus on the beauty of our other family, our family of faith, that too can exert a powerful influence on who we are and will be.

For example, when we're quarreling at home, and then come here and hear that we are to forgive, and then are forgiven when the Lord, even in our flaws, draws mercifully close to us in the Eucharist, we are transformed, however perceptibly, into something more like the Holy Family. And when our shortcomings in the midst of our human families take us down, we come back here again to be restored in the image of the Holy Family, again and again. This gathered family can make our other families better!

Happy Holidays, I have discovered, aren't always happy gatherings of our families! But, the good news is that we need not lose hope, but rather can come to the Lord in the midst of the Holy Family of our faith and ask his pardon and restoration. Then, restored in Christ in the Eucharist we are about to share, we have reason to declare "happy holidays" and happy any other day—for we discover the happy glimpse of who we truly are: beloved daughters and sons among the vast holy family of God's mercy. When our human families are far from holy families, may this holy family lead us to the perfecting union in Christ.