

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Holy Family
December 27, 2015

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Why does the Gospel Good News relate the incident of Mary and Joseph losing Jesus? It isn't sufficient to answer that it happened that way and therefore needed to be included. St John tells us so many things happened during Our Lord's earthly lifetime that were they all written the world could not contain the books. So we look for another answer.

To be sure, it is a real black mark on the Holy Family, not only that the Child Jesus could be lost, but that *for three days* Mary and Joseph sought Him in *the wrong places!* It was not until three days had passed it occurred to them to look for Jesus in the Temple. Our Lord Himself expressed surprise at this. "How is it they ye sought Me? Know ye not that I must be in My Father's house?" The impression given is that the Blessed Mother and Foster Father of Jesus were proceeding on certain assumptions of what their Son would do. Those assumptions turned out to be *wrong*.

The intent of the Gospel is not to cast aspersions upon the Holy Family! The message is that it is quite an easy thing to lose Jesus. And if this can happen to the Holy Family, it can so much more easily happen to us. The whole content of the Gospel account tells us the Blessed Lord never forces Himself upon us. That was the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. You remember the story. After they met Jesus "He made as though He would go further." When we ask the Lord to abide with us He does not stay any longer than we want Him.

The problem is *where* we want Him. Is Jesus Lord of an undivided heart, or is He a shelf-god? "Don't call me Jesus; I'll call you." We may assume the Lord is the companion of our life when, upon closer examination, the assumption means no more than we thought He was "in the company." Mary and Joseph thought their Son was "in the company" heading back towards Nazareth. We relax the observances of our discipleship. We compromise here and there with the secular world. It is so easy to draw a line in the sand and step back. And then it is an unpleasant surprise to discover we have in fact gone on our journey without Jesus. Heading towards Nazareth was the exact opposite direction from where Jesus was.

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There is no value building your life upon the assumption Jesus is “in the company.” There is no value sending out greeting cards proclaiming the Saviour’s birth unless He is *our* Saviour, personally present in us and with us.

As a Christian you and I are engaged in the most important work carried on anywhere in the world. It is the work of preparing an immortal soul for an unending future glory. Jesus said “I am the way” to do this. As our Saviour He is not a recipe! He is a *Person*. And as in any personal relationship, all concerned must mutually expend energy and effort. The love of God will not maintain us in holiness if our hearts are lukewarm to the whole spiritual transaction.

So where is the Good News? Jesus can be found by all those who seek Him humbly and with *repentance*. Mary and Joseph sought the Lord “sorrowing.” In those who put away self-assertion, and desire simply to be led by the Lord, sorrowing for having lost Jesus may be a sign of true repentance. And those who know where to look for Him easily find Christ. Ever since the experience of Mary and Joseph we know we can find Jesus in the Temple. The disciples on the road to Emmaus found the Lord in “the breaking of the bread.” There is no difficulty about it. Jesus is in the Father’s House, the Church.

Many people say they have a problem with “the institutional church.” But the Church cannot be a strange place to the believer in Christ. Because it is the Father’s House, we will be welcome there. After 1963 I never again lived with my parents except during summer vacations. But even after many years of marriage and a family of my own, when I visited my parents I could take off my shoes and tuck my legs up under me on their couch. I could get up unannounced to get a glass of juice from their kitchen. These are things I would never feel free to do as a guest in anyone else’s home. But in my parents’ house I knew I was loved. No wonder Jesus felt at home in the Temple! As a little country boy in the big city He could have been intimidated by the impressive personalities of the scholars and priests or the massive architecture of the place. But Jesus felt safe and secure in the Temple because in that place He knew He was loved. It was the Father’s House.

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We must always guard against the possibility of losing Jesus. What happened to the Holy Family serves as a warning. For those who have accepted the revelation of Christ, we have learned to find Him in His Church, as He promised. And we know as He did that in this place we are loved.