

Homily for Feast of the Holy Family (27th December 2020)

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Gen 15 :1-6,21 :1-3; Ps 127(128) ; Heb 11 :8,11-12,17-19 ; Lk 2 :22-40

Theme: Faith and family

Abram was the son of Terah, originally from the Ur of the Chaldeans. Terah and his family left Ur for the land of Canaan (Gen 11:27-32). Abram means ‘exalted father’. But God later changed this name to Abraham, ‘father of a multitude’ (Gen 17:5). At the beginning of Genesis chapter twelve, God made a threefold promise of land, dynasty and universal blessing to Abram. These promises were elevated to covenants in chapters fifteen, seventeen and twenty-two. The word *berith*, covenant, is from the Hebrew verb *crt*, which means “to cut”, reflecting what happens in a covenant, whereby the animals may be cut in two. A Covenant is not a contract in the modern sense of the word., but a “Sacred family bond” between persons, usually sealed by an oath or a sacrifice.

Our first reading today is from Genesis 15. God reemphasizes his promise to Abram that his reward is great. Abram asks God how He intends to fulfil the promise when he has no child. His servant, Eliezer, a foreigner, will inherit his property. God then restates his promise to Abram that the child of his body will be his heir. He took Abram outside to count the stars for such will be the number of his descendants. Abram then put his faith in God. To seal this deal, God made a covenant with Abram, elevating the promise of land to a covenant status (cf. Gen 15:18-21). Two Hebrew words help to understand this narrative: *al-tirah* (fear not) and *vehe’emin* (and he believed in or trust in). Abram was afraid that the promises of God would come to nought without an heir. God told him ‘fear not’ and Abram put his trust in God’s word. That is what it means to have faith. It is trust in God even when you have not seen the fulfilment of the promise. Abram’s story is an encouragement to many couples praying and waiting for a child in marriage. The Psalmist continues the theme of trust in the Lord. They are blessed who fear the Lord and walk in his ways. God will bless them with the gift of children like Abraham and Sarah.

The letter to the Hebrews summarizes the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham obeyed God in faith when God asked him to go to an unknown land. In the same way, Sarah had faith that she will conceive in her old age. God keeps his promises and covenant. The covenant with God demands some sacrifices from the other party, the human being. Abraham demonstrates how we should respond to God’s covenant, to put our faith in God even amid danger. Our faith must be tested in our covenantal relationship with God. When put to the test, Abraham was willing to offer up Isaac, the child of his old age. However, God’s covenant would always be fulfilled when we trust him.

God made an everlasting covenant with David, that his dynasty will last forever. The people of Israel anticipated this promise’s fulfilment for centuries and trusted that God would keep his covenant. God gave his only Son to fulfil the covenant. In the gospel, the parents of Jesus bring him to the Temple to fulfil what was laid down in Moses’s Law. Simeon, who had expected the fulfilment of the covenant of God and put his faith in God, could not contain his joy when he saw the child. He bursts out in joy, ‘my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see.’ Simeon saw the fulfilment of God’s promise, and he is happy to die in peace. Like Abram, Mary will be put to the test, and she will make sacrifices of offering up her Son.

Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman on the one hand, and between the couple and God on the other hand. Children in a family are gifts from God. When they have not come, couples should put their faith in God and trust that he will keep his promises as he did in the life of Abram and Sarah. Even when children do not come in marriage, we can still trust God because marriage is beyond procreation. It is first about the love and union that the

man and woman share. When God gives children in marriage, he demands parents' sacrifices and sometimes put them to test. Some parents suffer for the sake of their children for different reasons. We can bring such children to the altar of God, offering their intentions and asking God to lead and direct them. The covenant of marriage and family life demand sacrifices, and the invitation today is to turn to God in faith. The Holy family, keeping the law of Moses, teaches us a life of dedication and devotion. Families are encouraged to pray together whenever it is possible. Mary and Joseph teach us how to bring up a child in the family, knowing that sacrifices are involved and accepting them in faith.