

In ancient Israel, giving birth was an event surrounded by a certain amount of mystery. God alone is the creator and sustainer of all human life and so when a woman gives birth she participates in a mystery that touches God directly. This is why the people of God have always placed a sacred value on all human life.

Because of this, after delivering a baby, a woman was expected to withdraw from every day activities for a while, just as Moses veiled himself from the people after meeting with God. Mosaic law prescribed a specific amount of days before women could appear in the temple or participate in any religious activities. When this time was up they rejoined the community by offering two sacrifices.

This is what Mary and Joseph were doing in today's Gospel. The law required a sacrifice of a pigeon and a lamb. But we are told that Mary offered two pigeons. There was an exception in the law that allowed those who were too poor to afford a lamb, to offer two pigeons instead.

This small detail affords us some insight into the way the Holy Family lived. Jesus, the eternal God and Lord of all Creation, not only became man on Christmas day, but He became a member of a humble, working class family that struggled to make ends meet.

Mary, the Queen of Heaven and Earth, lived her incomparably holy life as a wife and mother, maintaining a household on a very small budget.

Joseph, patron of the universal Church and the greatest of the patriarchs, protector and guardian of God and the mother of God, worked hard just to keep bread on the table.

While the Magi would bring gifts that would sustain them on their flight into Egypt, at this time they had to keep track of every penny. They did not have a second home, expensive hobbies, an investment portfolio, an impressive bank account, or take fancy vacations.

But in spite of this they were the richest family in history. We venerate them and learn from them. Because their wealth was not in money, it was in faith.

The desire to provide for our families, to have enough to pay our bills and keep food on the table, is a legitimate desire. And the work we undertake to obtain those things is a duty. But beyond this, the desire for things can lead to greed.

Every day the news seems to prove that the one thing that people with money and power want most, is more money and more power. This applies not only to individuals but to families, and nations as well. Regardless of our means, we are all susceptible to falling to the temptation of materialism.

Charles Dickens gave us the example of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man who has let his desire for more, crowd out his duty to his fellow man. As a result his growth as a human being is stifled and stunted.

While this has been a difficult year for us, it was not that long ago that there was another world wide financial crisis that cost people their homes and livelihood.

Jon Carlton was one of them. He was an executive in an insurance firm when the global economy crashed in 2008. Forty percent of everything he had built up in his firm disappeared overnight. The savings for his children's education also dwindled and his 401k lost so much money it wasn't even worth the trouble to check on.

Three of his closest friends found themselves in the same boat. Before the crisis they had all planned a pilgrimage to Rome together. But now, faced with such a tremendous economic strain, they asked themselves if the cost of the pilgrimage was really worth it. To judge by their bank accounts, it was certainly not, but to judge by what was in their hearts it most certainly was.

So they spent a week in Rome, touring the basilicas and the catacombs, attending a papal audience, and visiting the priceless collections of the Vatican's museums. At every stop they were deeply moved by the thought that behind everything they saw, there was a deep abiding faith; the ancient faith of patrons, priests, artists, bricklayers, and stonemasons who had given what little they could for the greater glory of God.

For Jon's part, he was most deeply moved by one of the city's humbler attractions, the Holy Stairs, the Scala Santa. These are the marble steps that led to the presidium of Pontius Pilate. These are the steps

which Christ climbed to stand before the governor as Pilate passed judgement on Him.

They are in Rome, rather than Jerusalem, because in the 4th century, Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine, had them shipped to the eternal city and reconstructed in a small shrine. For more than a thousand years, pilgrims have visited this site and climbed the stairs on their knees while they pray the Way of the Cross.

Jon said, “It was when I was climbing those steps on my knees, that I realized there is so much more to life. There is someone who accompanies us.”

Whether we are experiencing the weight of the cross, beaten down by the events of the year, or we are doing just fine having weathered the worst, what matters is the faith in Christ that gives our lives meaning and purpose to everything we do.

While material prosperity and financial hardships come and go, the love of Christ is stable.

Money is a useful tool, perhaps the most useful tool of our present age. But it is not the only one and it is not meant to be the main one. The example of the Holy family, and the example of Abraham, remind us of this.

Without faith, it is possible to have a lot of money and still be thoroughly miserable, just like Ebenezer Scrooge, and just like King Herod.

With faith, it is possible to have very little money and yet live a life of joy and meaning, as the Holy Family did. In this time of stay at home orders, curfews, and shuttered businesses, it is important to keep our family together. I know many families have been forced to be together more than they are used to, but perhaps this is God's way of telling us to readjust our priorities and put the spiritual ahead of the material.

Imagine what family meals must have been like for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, a time to relax, to converse with each other, and a time to build those family relationships that are so important in our lives. We learn from each other and get to know each other.

The modern world would like very much to take that way from us. If we let it do so, it will truly impoverish our lives and our society.

In addition to family time we need to set aside some time each day for ourselves, to grow in our faith.

Take a little time each day to spend with God in personal prayer. The Liturgy of the Hours is a great place to start. Take the time to reflect on the Bible and speak heart to heart with Christ. We know that He always hears us.

This is how we protect our faith and make it grow.

There is a story about a prince who once called all of his wise men and advisors together. He charged them to bring him a word of advice that would be applicable in any age, in any circumstance.

The wise men labored long and hard, proposed many things but all were found wanting. Finally one young man, wise beyond his years approached the king and told him simply, “this too shall pass.”

We are faced with many crisis these days; attacks on the Church, our faith, our family, the integrity of our government and our leaders. But one of the advantages of being a student of history is the knowledge that we have been through worse, and we have survived.

This too shall pass, but our faith in our Lord is eternal.