

*Marriage and Family*

Everybody loves an upgrade. If you could get a specialty pizza for the price of a plain cheese pizza, you'd take that upgrade. If you could rent a full size car for the price of a compact car, you'd take that upgrade too. And if you could fly first class for the price of coach, you would definitely take that upgrade -- I know I would. Everybody wants an upgrade. Some people even want to upgrade their God.

You heard me correctly, "Some people even want to upgrade their God." You see, our God, the God called Yahweh who rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, the transcendent being Jesus prayed to, the God we Christians call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is just not very flashy compared to some of the other gods of human imagination. Our God is rather straightforward, no frills, and kind of old-fashioned. That just doesn't cut it for a lot of people today. They want a God who is more "with it," more hip, more contemporary. Allow me to illustrate.

We are about two months from the season of Advent and less than three months from Christmas. Soon all our nativity scenes, some times we call them crèches, will be coming out of storage. Some are made of porcelain, some of Plaster of Paris, and some of modern plastic resins. But all of them have cute little animals and usually a smiling Holy Family consisting of a cool, calm, and collected Mary, a strong looking Joseph, and an adorable little baby Jesus. The scene is so clean and happy, that you'd think baby

Jesus must have dropped right out of heaven into a sanitized manger and the waiting arms of a freshly scrubbed Mary and Joseph.

The truth, of course, is that an animals' feeding stall is anything but clean and fresh smelling. Animal's feeding troughs stink and there's likely to be fresh animal droppings on the floor of the stall. It's not the kind of place anyone today would want to have a baby, not that having a baby is a particularly neat and tidy event itself. There is no dignified way for a woman to deliver a baby, and there will always be blood and mucus and pain as part of the birthing process. But through the messiness of a typical human birth, and in the filth of animals' stall, is the way that Jesus, the Son of God, the very King of the Universe, chose to enter our human world. That Jesus couldn't find a more dignified way to become a human being may be an embarrassment to some of us, we might prefer to clean up and upgrade his Nativity, but that's the way it happened.

Jesus' death was even worse. Some artistic representations of the Crucifixion show Jesus barely bleeding. You might get the impression from them that the Cross of Christ was only a little more than a minor inconvenience for him. But when we read the gospels we hear how Jesus was beaten and abused virtually all night long. We read how he was flogged by the guards at Pilate's command, receiving 39 lashes with a leather whip that had little pieces of metal on the ends specifically designed to rip flesh and bone, in that way inflicting the maximum pain possible. No, the Crucifixion wasn't a pretty picture. It was probably a lot like Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," which upset some people because of its gruesome, but very realistic, detail.

Still, from even the earliest times, and even yet today, there have been those who said – wrongly -- that Jesus didn't really have a body like yours or mine, and that Jesus didn't really feel pain like we do. A suffering and dying God is an embarrassment to them. They want to downplay the Cross and upgrade Jesus to something more than human. Well, if that was true -- and it's most certainly not -- then Jesus wouldn't deserve to be called "Savior" because he didn't really suffer the worst of human pain for you and me. But God was and is deep in the human flesh of Jesus, and Jesus did suffer for us, as much as a human can possibly suffer, and he most definitely is our Savior.

It's that specificity of Jesus, the particularity of his life, which bothers a lot of people. They want to upgrade Jesus. They want to make Jesus more general, more universal, more sophisticated, more politically correct, and more "spiritual" -- whatever that means. But in contrast, the Bible presents a Jesus who was born in a specific time and place: Israel, about 2000 years ago. Jesus had a specific gender, male, and he belonged to a specific religion and tribe, the Jews. No doubt, Jesus' message about love and forgiveness is universal in scope and it is for all people in all times and places. But Jesus' message cannot possibly be understood apart from who he particularly is and the specific time, place, and religious context he lived, died and rose again in.

Moreover, Jesus' teaching is very specific. It's exact and precise. Jesus dealt in particulars, not generalities. What Jesus teaches us is really quite simple; we just make it complicated. We make it complicated because we

want to create loopholes. We think we're upgrading God's law, but really we're denigrating it by bending it to fit what we think is more sophisticated, more spiritual. Human philosophers like Immanuel Kant wrote incredibly dense volumes on ethics and complicated treatises on how to arrive at the summa of morals, the Categorical Imperative. Utilitarian philosophers, operating on the Pleasure Principle, created a kind of calculus to be used to determine how to create the most good for the most people in any situation. This is complex, heavy, academic stuff.

In contrast, God's word is always clear, direct, and aimed at the real situations of everyday life. Take the Ten Commandments for instance. What part of "Thou shalt not kill," do you not understand? How much commentary does "Thou shalt not commit adultery" really need? And creating pleasure and happiness is not a factor in God's ethical code. Adultery, bearing false witness, stealing, and the like are always wrong, no matter how much pleasure they might bring.

Another good example of how practical and precise Jesus' biblical ethics are can be found in the first lesson and gospel reading today. Genesis tells us about the creation of man and woman, and then Jesus quotes, summarizes, and interprets the Genesis account in his response to the Pharisees, as he says, "... From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

There's not a lot of ambiguity in what Jesus said there. But notice the specificity and the earthiness of this account. Jesus specifies that this applies to a man and his wife, one and one. It is not up to us to generalize this to other numbers or genders. Notice also what the man and woman become. Our temptation here is to upgrade by spiritualizing, but: They do not become one in spirit; they do not become "soul mates" – whatever they are; and they do not form a trusting relationship – whatever that is. They become one flesh -- one flesh.

For those who want to upgrade Jesus there's that embarrassing flesh again, the weak human flesh Jesus was born in, the bloody human flesh Jesus died in. Yet, Jesus thought human flesh was important enough that a man and woman's flesh would be the basis of marital love and the foundation of human families, which are the basic building blocks of human society. And in a world where serial divorce is the norm, Jesus is counter-cultural enough to say that these marriages that are God's intention in Creation are not to be carelessly rent asunder, that is, they are not to be pulled apart. When two become one flesh and that flesh is torn apart, it hurts. Jesus wants to save us from that pain. He has a plan for families.

It's been a while since I read Aldous Huxley's book *Brave New World*. But if I remember correctly, in the future world he envisioned, genetically engineered children are conceived in test tubes in a laboratory, then they develop in a nutrient broth instead of a mother's womb, until they can survive on their own when they are then raised not by parents in a family but by a faculty in a school. Of course, that's science fiction, but it's perhaps not too far from what could be science fact one day soon.

God has given us a blueprint for marriage and family life. Do we really want an upgrade? Can we really improve on what the Bible teaches? Do we ever get so educated and sophisticated that we get beyond the scriptures? We believe in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in leading and guiding us, but would the Holy Spirit ever contradict what He has already said in the Bible? No. God has already shown us what is best. He has not withheld anything from us and He calls us to follow Him.

God, our loving and forgiving Father, is the model for all parenthood. The Holy Family, Mary, Joseph and Jesus, is the prime example of how we are to live in families. The Bible gives us clear, specific instructions as to how to order our marriages and families. God has blessed us with these things. May we make good use of them. Amen.