

Readings for the Feast of the Holy Family

FIRST READING: Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

A reading from the Book of Sirach:

God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons. Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and preserves himself from them. When he prays, he is heard; he stores up riches who reveres his mother. Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children, and, when he prays, is heard. Whoever reveres his father will live a long life; he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother. My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins, a house raised in justice to you.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home; your children like olive plants around your table.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD. The LORD bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

SECOND READING: Colossians 3:12-21

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians:

Brothers and sisters: Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them. Children, obey your parents

in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

The word of the Lord.

Gospel: Luke 2:41-52

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Each year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the Feast of the Holy Family

I have always looked forward to Christmas. Like most people, I enjoy the trimmings of the holidays. Growing up, we went all-out with decorations. We had a crèche that my parents made. My mother painted by hand plaster figurines and my father built the stable. I have fond memories of holidays at home. I will admit that at five or six years old I began to be suspicious of why we were always out of the house for some really unnecessary errand and just miss Santa Claus.

We always gathered to celebrate and exchange gifts on Christmas Eve before the Midnight Mass. I always went from the age of ten. I was an altar boy (not a server) and always faithful in fulfilling my serving assignments. As a result I would be rewarded with the privilege of serving the Midnight Mass. Since I have been a priest, I have had parochial responsibilities that took up Christmas Eve and often lasted until the afternoon on Christmas Day. For many years, my family had to change the traditions to accommodate my priestly schedule. Since they have moved, subsequently, to Wisconsin, we have celebrated on New-Year's Day. Only once, in 2017, did we celebrate as we did. I was on Sabbatical and had just returned from a ten week program in Tucson, AR. This is the first time that I will not gather with them to celebrate Christmas at all.

I find myself anticipating the end of the pandemic and not the birthday of Jesus. With the arrival and availability of a couple vaccines, there is hope that it could end in a few months. To

quote Winston Churchill, "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." We still need patience and vigilance. May God bestow grace upon us to endure.

I have spoken to my family via phone. I have emailed them too. Last week they sent a short video file. It was good to see their faces and hear their voices connected. I haven't seen them since last February. With that and my memories, I am content for Christmas. I write this on Tuesday before Christmas. Normally I have been writing the Sunday reflection on Thursday. I wanted to have my Christmas free.

The reading from Sirach seems to provide a snapshot of family life. The father is set up as the head of the household and all important. The mother is mentioned only in reference to respecting the father. The children are to honor the father and thereby, incidentally honoring mom. This passage reflects the fulfillment of the Fourth Commandment, "Honor thy father and mother." There is no reference to love, relationships, or fidelity. These are the mainstays of family life. A family without love is no family. All of the behaviors and responsibilities that Sirach mentions are shared by all members of a family.

The passage implies that the father is the most important person within the family. Judaism will refer to God as Father, as do Christians. The founders, aside from God are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; as patriarchy. That is true, but there is another side to the Tradition. After the remnant returned to Jerusalem out of Diaspora, the Jews faced a problem. After generations of living among pagans, who was really Jewish? Before the Captivity the question one asked was, "Who was your father?" After the return the question became, "Who is your mother?" The reason for this is simple. Maternity is easier proved than paternity. Since then Jewishness comes through the mother's line. Even though Sirach, who wrote his book after the return about two hundred years before Jesus, describes a patriarchy, the readers of it all knew how things really worked.

The passage is not so much a snapshot of how a family lived and loved. It is more about defending the Fourth Commandment and giving the benefits for a person to do so. Forgiveness of sin is a powerful motive. There is one motive that gives a glimpse of familial love in relationships. If one honors and respects one's parents, having one's own children is the blessing. So is a long live with a long life with those children when, presumably, those children care for them.

Even though Jerusalem was the capitol of a Jewish homeland again, the majority of Jews still lived in Diaspora. The Ten Lost Tribes weren't really lost. They were dispersed throughout the known world. Junior and family may have lived in the suburbs of Colossae, but mom and dad may have lived two hundred miles away in Ephesus. The ancients had a bigger problem than do we. It takes us mere hours to travel via car and interstate the distance. Via caravan, it could take months. They also didn't have phones or internet either. I can have great compassion for people facing their responsibilities in those days.

I am always dubious of the celibate clergy's advice to married people and families. St. Paul is no exception. For many years a "submissive wife" seemed like a difficult stone to pass. With the revised translation it is just as bad or worse. Weaving a "subordinate wife" into a homily is almost impossible, at least for me. Subordinate is a word we can easily use with clauses not

people. Submissive means having to give in to another. Subordinate means being beneath another. Thank you St. Paul and bishops.

When Paul wrote his letters, the epistles, he wasn't a saint so his words came from a man like you and me. He, like us, is a product of his age, culture and faith. His letter to the faithful of Colossae reflected his historical, cultural and religious milieu. I have always found the heart of his message rests in his advice to the guys, not the gals. Love one another. Care for one another. Respect one another. Forgive one another. These are hallmarks of a happy family with healthy relationships. The art of the possible can also describe a healthy family as well as define a vision of political discourse.

I've also maintained that Paul knew and understood his audience. Who was able to read and write in his day? If his audience, or better congregation, was Jewish both men and women may have been able to read. If it was Gentile, perhaps only the men could read. Paul wrote to faith communities of the eastern Mediterranean. Machismo is still a force of contention in that part of the world. Paul simply translated his message into different words. He told both husbands and wives to love, care and forgive each other with respect.

The Gospel tells a tale of a family; in particular, the Holy Family. Any time the trio Jesus, Mary and Joseph come to mind we know that they are special. For much of my formative life, they were promoted as the ideal family for us to emulate. They were the pinnacle of familial perfection. Since perfection is only of God, Jesus transformed familial life into Holiness. I challenge that notion.

Let's look at them in another light. The elements of the story are anything but normal. Mary became pregnant with Jesus through the intervention by the Holy Spirit. By the power of God alone Mary became a mother. She remained a virgin before, during and after Jesus' birth. Consider the implications of that for a moment. The baby was God. We all know how demanding newborns can be. Think about that. Then there's Joseph. Many people get married when a baby is due. Joseph married Mary and the baby wasn't his. Mary and Joseph lived together as brother and sister their entire lives. Talk about sainthood. None of us could, or should live like that. How can that be a model for anyone to follow? They did live like that. They did so by the grace of God. Surely they loved each other too. They had a bond that lasted. That's the part of the relationship to emulate. They are the model to thrive in an impossible situation through love.

Parts of our deeply religious and pious traditions have a tendency to undercut the significance of the Incarnation. God became one like us in all but sin but we make his family perfect. This story shows that part of the mystery included dysfunction. As Jesus was not spared suffering and death, he was neither spared the pitfalls of adolescence nor strained relationships with his parents. Remember, he went through the same things we do. That's the significance of Jesus' humanity. We assume Jesus age to be at least twelve years old. He would have experienced his Bar Mitzvah. Otherwise he would not have been making the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem during a feast. Part of a Bar Mitzvah is the boy stating, "Today I am a man!" Aside from a ritual that celebrates and blesses the onset of puberty, it was also a rite of passage that marked a boy's choice to accept and follow the Covenant with God.

If I had pulled a stunt like this one and so mouthed off to my parents, I would have been grounded-for-life or at least gotten a good smack for my arrogance. We read this passage as believer in Jesus, we already know who Jesus is; the Messiah and God's Only Begotten Son. This is why Jesus gets off scot-free. Mary and Joseph already had an inkling of Jesus' divinity and mission. This explanation makes sense, but has always seemed to be a bit incomplete. I believe there's more.

What was Jesus' mission? God was born as one like us to be the only sacrifice fitting for God; God. Jesus came to die on the cross, accepting the death of a criminal, though innocent. He died in our place taking all our sins, guilt and shame upon himself. God forgave and redeemed us in this way. God's motives were simple and came out of God's infinite, eternal and unconditional identity. God is love. Jesus had an infinite supply of it. Love permeated the very fabric of the Holy Family. It was the glue that bound them together. Forgiveness is at the heart of this story. Mercy the three of them shared. Jesus loved and forgave his parents. They, whom their son and God's had already forgiven them. They in turn could forgive their son, who was on the verge of being a teenager. God helped them to cope with that trauma.

In this way, the Holy Family becomes more real. They faced life as we do. The main vision we have of the Holy Family comes from two places, scripture and Tradition. The gospels give scant insight into their private lives. That's because the Gospels are about Jesus two-fold mission. He came to proclaim the good news of God's forgiveness and to die on the cross and rise from the dead for our redemption. It's not a biography; it's a testament. The gospel tells the story of God becoming a human being out of love for each of us and the entire human race.

We also see how the family responds to crises. Matthew and Luke began with people having to deal with a surprise pregnancy. The four gospels don't always portray Jesus' family acting well. In Mark Jesus' family came to get him and take him home. When Jesus continued to preach and teach the crowds his family called him crazy. They didn't seem to understand the significance of Jesus' work and mission. In John, Jesus' mother forced him to begin his ministry before he felt ready. This is about the first of Jesus' signs at the wedding in Cana. She arranged for Jesus to turn water into wine. Also and only in John, Jesus' mother stood with other family near Jesus' cross and witnessed his death. I mention that in John, Jesus' mother's name is never mentioned. In and through all this drama, God brought to fruition his plan of salvation for us.

I find great hope in this interpretation. If God could work with odds like that, God can work with the messes we all make. No matter how bad it gets, no matter how chaotic is live and no matter what boundaries we build between us. The power and grace of God will prevail. God gives life, love, faith and hope. When this life ends, eternal life begins. God is love, love that is eternal and unconditional. God's power is a magnificent outpouring of that love by the Holy Spirit.

Mary and Joseph actively searched to find Jesus. They looked high and low. They had almost made it home, before they realized Jesus had wandered off. They had to return, tracing their steps, to Jerusalem and finally the Temple. They found him there. If I focus only on that part of the story, I can finally find the purpose of the tale. We seek Jesus. We discover, as did Mary and Joseph, that he can be found. We, too, have found Jesus as the result of our search. We know Jesus near and within us. We have found him in the breaking of bread. When at least two of us

gather in Jesus' name, we find him with us. Here is the power of this story of Pilgrimage. The journey we take to find Jesus is from our heads to our hearts.

Scripture has promised that God is near to the broken hearted. The Psalms sing that a humbled, contrite heart God will never spurn. Today we have heard that Jesus presence in our lives is the fruit of our search for God. He is where we least expect to find him, in our midst and in our heart.

May God keep you healthy and safe. May God give you the grace to keep others safe.

James D. Beath
December 26-27, 2020