

ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph
December 30, 2022

Lectionary Readings:

Sirach 3:2-6,12-14	Respect and kindness in families bring blessings.
Psalms 128:1-5	Care for the family gently if you fear the Lord.
Colossians 3:12-21	Practice humility and thankfulness at home.
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23	The Holy Family escapes danger.

Matthew:

During this liturgical year (Cycle A), we read primarily from the Gospel according to Matthew. This venerable Christian rabbi, member of a Jewish community perhaps living in Damascus toward the end of the 1st Century of the Common Era (80-85-90 CE), wrote a “book” for the guidance of Church leaders in their ministry to the community of those who had come to Christ, especially those with a working knowledge of the Jewish traditions. Ten times in this book, Matthew will make references to the Jewish Scriptures in what has been called “fulfillment texts” to show that in Jesus of Nazareth, God was bringing to completion the work begun in the life of the Hebrew people. (See verses 15,17-18, and 23.)

Typically in Matthew, the story of the birth of Jesus is told from the perspective of Joseph, his legal father. Jewish Christians would have found this quite normal. Any other focus would have been most irregular. Joseph, always alert to the will of God, willingly and spontaneously follows the divine direction given by the messenger from God as if from the very mouth of God. In fact, angels are often used by pious Jewish storytellers to avoid pronouncing the sacred name of God. “An angel said” really means “God said.”

Matthew does not hesitate to make a parallel between what happened to God’s holy people, Israel, in the past, and God’s Son, Jesus Christ, in the present. Israel went down to Egypt to escape death by famine; Jesus goes to Egypt to escape death at the hands of Herod. God called his people out of Egypt under Moses back to the Land of Promise; God calls his Son Jesus back to the ancient land of Israel, in fact to Galilee, which was the area where the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been located. It is no accident that Matthew suggests a parallel also with the mighty leader Moses whose life was saved from death as a mere infant by being put afloat on the Nile where he was found and brought up in the court of that same pharaoh who had decreed the death of all male Jewish children.

Dreams come easily to Joseph. Like many in the ancient world, he takes dreams to be a means by which Gods speaks, by which God expresses his particular will for the individual who is willing to hear. Joseph had already heard about his wife, with whom he had not yet lived, being already pregnant. In a dream, he was assured that God was at work in that situation. He believed and he acted on that belief. Now, he hears that the child is in danger. Again, he believes, and he acts on it. The early Church took this story of the little family within which God’s Son was born and nurtured as a paradigm of itself, the realm where the living Christ was still active by the power of the Holy Spirit. Fragile and vulnerable, this Christian community does not hesitate to place itself under the protective mantle of the great God who is the Father of Jesus and the mighty guarantor of the Church’s future.

Sirach:

This great teacher from the 2nd century before the Common Era wrote in Hebrew a text for the instruction of Jewish youth. His grandson translated the text into Greek for the Jews in Alexandria who did not know Hebrew. The Hebrew text has not survived. The Greek version is part of the Second Canon (Deuterocanonical or Apocrypha) honored as Scripture by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Children, even in adulthood, are advised to respect and care for their parents.

Colossians:

The transformation of the entire person, which took place in the conversion process and was marked by investiture in a new white garment at baptism, now must extend its effects to all the relationships in which Christians are involved, including the marriage relationship and family life. One cannot be renewed only at church and for worship. That renewal also affects the quality of the family. Tender love and cooperation between husband and wife, respect between parents and children, obedience of children toward their parents, and the parents' encouragement of the children will characterize the Christian home.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways has your family (group, parish) been blessed this past year? Have you been aware of some special guidance from God? Pointing you in a new direction? Protecting you from some possible danger, error, or evil that could have come your way if God had not indicated a different path to follow? In what ways have you changed during the recent past? Are you aware that God has been guiding you through that change?

2. How has family life changed from the times when you were younger? What was different in your family of origin compared to the way your family life is today? Has there been progress or regress? Do you think there is more quality today in your way of relating to other people or less quality? Are you responsible for this change in quality of relationships? What can you do to make your relationships even better now? Is there still time for you to change?

3. What can you, your group, or your parish do to contribute to a renewal of family life in the part of the world where you live? Are you all that overwhelmed and helpless? Where do you see evidence that God is still at work in the lives of families? Do you think those model families could be held up as examples of hope for others? Do you know single-parent families where the children are growing up just fine? Do you know some young parents who have high ideals for themselves and for their children? Can you see hope based on God in their faces?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Call your parish office and ask for the names of two or three new families in the parish. Give them a call; invite them to your home; offer to inform them about the parish, its resources, and its needs.

PRAYER

“Our lives are made of days and nights, of seasons and years, for we are part of a universe of suns and moons and planets. We mark ends and we make beginnings, and, in all, we praise God for the grace and mercy that fill our days. Amen.” (Catholic Household Blessings, USCC)

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Among human beings, the family provides an environment for the creation, education, nurture, and growth of the person in all of its aspects. Biological life springs from the relationship of a man and a woman committed to one another and to the children to be born from that union of hearts, souls, and bodies. Protection and care for those children is provided by mothers and fathers as human life develops from the embryo to adulthood. Love and guidance provide the energies needed for children to hope in a future for themselves and for their own families. Education in human and social values comes first from the family.

Any disorder in family life affects children profoundly and sometimes leaves wounds that will always be carried as burdens in those lives that have been so marked.

A healthy family life also includes education and formation in spiritual and religious values and principles. Mothers and fathers who themselves possess a healthy spirituality and practice positive religious expressions will pass these on to their children primarily by the example and witness of their lives. It is natural for children to want to absorb and imitate the values and practices of adults if these are seen as beneficial, freely chosen, and productive of happiness for the individual. Parents do not need to “preach” these things to their children. In fact, “preaching” is often perceived as an indication that adults are fairly insecure in the ideas and principles they promote so vocally and so loudly. The result is that children often react protectively against such “preaching” and do the opposite!

Love, respect, and kindness are never oppressive when these are authentic and firmly rooted in a healthy family environment. Unfortunately, what some call “love” happens to be a distorted kind of compulsion to control another person. That ends up being most destructive of freedom and of growth. Children cannot grow to become responsible persons in that kind of environment. The mystery of Christian marriage (called a sacrament in the Catholic tradition) envelops persons and their most intimate relationships in the power and healing energies of Jesus Christ, the Lord of our Redemption.

(See: The Catechism #2201-13,2232-33)