

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Feast of the Holy Family

First reading:

(Ecclesiasticus 3.2-6, 12-14)

Honour Your Father and Your Mother

The Book of Ecclesiasticus is a collection of wise instructions on how to behave in accordance with the Law.

The author must have been an expert in the Law, living in Jerusalem. He sees the Law not as a tiresome set of rules to be obeyed, but as God's loving gift to his people, to show them how they should act to keep close to God. It is therefore to be treasured, a guide of inestimable value.

The reading for today is a meditation and expansion on the commandment, 'Honour your father and your mother', explaining just how this should be put into practice.

What was Jesus like as a baby? Did he cry? He must have done, to make his baby feelings known. Did he bawl and howl? Did he cry when he scraped the skin of his knees? Did he fall out of trees and break his arm? Did he make mistakes? Did he play pranks? He must have made jokes. He must have been a wonderful joy to his parents, loving, delightful company, full of the devastatingly simple wisdom of children. And they must have been loving, wonderful company for him, too, an anchor of affection and security.

Question:

How to honour father and mother in later life - or to honour children?

Second reading:

(Colossians 3.12-21)

The Overcoat of Love

In an incredibly short space, the Letter to the Colossians gives a whole series of instructions on living in community: compassion, forgiveness, love and peace - not to mention gratitude. Love is a sort of overcoat, holding all the other qualities together. If we reflect on these and put them into practice, there can be no rivalry or hostility in the Christian community - even within a family, where the strains of Christmas often make love grow thin.

However, a loving family is the model for the different relationships of a loving Christian community. God's fatherhood and motherhood is the model for human parentage, and Christ's devotion to his body the Church is the model for the devotion of spouses to one another.

The reading begins with an inspiring reminder that we form the Chosen People of God; God's choice leaves us little alternative to the attempt to behave as God's people. The paragraph ends with the counsel to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus; Christians are those over whom the name of the Lord Jesus has been called, making us members of his company and putting us under his power. This is the challenge really to act as God's people.

Question:

Is it really possible to regard the Christian community as a family?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 2.13-15, 19-23)

The Flight into Egypt

The flight into Egypt is a splendid gospel for the feast of the Holy Family. It tells of a time of the acutest danger, when Mary and Joseph must have been at their wits' ends to care for their precious child, and so most bound together as an endangered family, and at their most reliant on God in a situation which appears humanly hopeless. The powerful, resourceful and pitiless Herod was a formidable threat; he would have no scruples about killing a few male children in the little hill town of Bethlehem.

There is also a further dimension: on many occasions, and especially here, Matthew depicts Jesus as a Second Moses: from the beginning Herod threatens Jesus' life just as Pharaoh had threatened Moses' survival as a baby. Just as Moses went into exile after killing the Egyptian overseer, so Jesus also goes into exile, to return when the threat is past. Of both it is said, 'Those who wanted to kill you/the child are dead' (Exodus 4.19).

Later Jesus will be seen as the Second Moses when he stays 40 days and nights fasting in the desert, and when he gives the Law at the Sermon on the Mount and at the Transfiguration.

Question:

How can you bind your family more closely together in Christ?
