

Feast of the Holy Family – Cycle C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

The Feast of the Holy Family honors the family group of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. This feast developed only in the 17th century. Built on the Gospel accounts, this family is looked upon as an excellent domestic unit representing the ideal family life. To promote family life and build up devotion to the Holy Family, a feast was established for the Universal Church in 1921 (under Pope Benedict XV), and it is currently celebrated on the Sunday after Christmas or on December 30th when Christmas falls on Sunday. There is an optional set of readings for the 1st and 2nd Readings, both are presented here.

1st Reading - Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

Israelite wisdom, like the wisdom of other peoples, was the product of the scribal schools and the scribal class; this class first appeared under the monarchy and followed Egyptian models in administration and procedure. Wisdom is gained by counsel and instruction (Proverbs 1:5; 12:15; 13:14; 19:20f), and the young man is frequently admonished to accept instruction. Wisdom comes from association with the wise (Proverbs 13:20). The tradition of wisdom begins with primordial man (Ezekiel 28:12). The wise man accepts correction and instruction (Proverbs 9:8ff; 21:11); he is always learning, where the fool refuses to learn.

Israelite wisdom was modified by its relation to faith in Yahweh, which gives it a character of its own. Both Egypt and Mesopotamia had gods who were venerated for their wisdom, but these gods were specialists. Yahweh alone is truly wise; His wisdom is exhibited in creation (Proverbs 3:19; Job 38- 39).

Wisdom is a treasure which men cannot discover, for it is found only with God, who grants it to men. The wisdom of God is seen not only in His creation but in His management of human history (Job 12:13). Wisdom, while learned from tradition, is ultimately a gift of Yahweh (Proverbs 2:6).

The wisdom literature alone in the Old Testament directs attention explicitly to the problems of the individual person; it is free of peculiarly national traits and of messianism. Its merit is that it does draw attention to the importance of the business of daily life of the man who is not very important, and its emphasis on the fact that life is unity and integrity which must be preserved from the disintegration of folly is not misplaced.

Today we hear Sirach tell us that fidelity to parents (the 4th commandment) is

fidelity to Yahweh.

² For the LORD sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons. ³ He who honors his father atones for sins;

This goes beyond the 4th commandment which promises long life (Exodus 20:12).

⁴ he stores up riches who reveres his mother. ⁵ He who honors his father is gladdened by children, and when he prays he is heard. ⁶ He who reveres his father will live a long life; he obeys the LORD who brings comfort to his mother. ¹² My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. ¹³ Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not in the fullness of your strength. ¹⁴ For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins -- a house raised in justice to you.

This is a commentary on the 4th commandment (Exodus 20:12). Fidelity to this commandment also atones for sins.

Optional 1st Reading - 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28

The main purpose of 1st and 2nd Samuel is to provide a history of the foundation of the kingdom of Israel and the settlement of the throne on David and his line. At the end of the book of Judges it is clear that the people see a monarchy as the only way out of a situation of internal strife and anarchy. Outside enemies have been reduced to one, the Philistines, who live along the Mediterranean coast; but they are so powerful and aggressive that the very survival of Israel seems to be in doubt if the tribes don't unite under a common leader.

Samuel is regarded as the last of the Judges and was the man chosen to bring about this unification. God uses him to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel and later, to anoint David as Saul's successor.

In our first reading today we hear of Samuel's birth and dedication. This dedication took place at Shiloh where the ark of the covenant was until King David brought it to Jerusalem.

²⁰ [in those days Hannah] conceived, and at the end of her term bore a son whom she called Samuel, since she had asked the LORD for him.

A more appropriate name for him would be Saul which means "asked;" Samuel means "the name of El" or "his name is El." El is a name for God.

²¹ The next time her husband Elkanah was going up with the rest of his household to

offer the customary sacrifice to the LORD

This is probably referring to the requirement to redeem the firstborn son (Exodus 13:13; 34:20).

and to fulfill his vows, ²² Hannah did not go, explaining to her husband, “Once the child is weaned, I will take him to appear before the LORD and to remain there forever;

Hannah may have refrained from making the pilgrimage on this occasion out of a desire to prolong the time she would keep the child. The practice in the Near East, however, was to nurse a child for up to three years (2 Maccabees 7:27). Eventually, when the child was weaned, he was brought and presented with a very respectable offering.

I will offer him as a perpetual nazirite.”

The vow of a nazirite involved these three things:

- 1) abstinence from wine and strong drink,
- 2) refraining from cutting the hair off the head during the whole period of the continuance of the vow, and
- 3) the avoidance of contact with the dead.

Samuel’s mother is offering him as a perpetual nazirite which means that these things will be forever forbidden. When we normally think of a nazirite, we think of Samson rather than Samuel.

²⁴ Once he [Samuel] was weaned, she brought him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour,

An ephah is approximately one bushel.

and a skin of wine, and presented him at the temple of the LORD in Shiloh. ²⁵ After the boy’s father had sacrificed the young bull, Hannah, his mother, approached Eli ²⁶

Eli was high priest at the sanctuary of Shiloh.

and said: “Pardon, my lord! As you live my lord, I am the woman who stood near you here, praying to the LORD. ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the LORD granted my request. ²⁸ Now I, in turn, give him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he shall be dedicated to the LORD.” She left him [Samuel] there.

2nd Reading - Colossians 3:12-21

The purpose of Colossians was to bolster the faith of the community and correct errors reported about the church in Colossae. False teachers are at work in the community

and since these false teachers are charged with “not holding to the head”, the errors must have arisen within the community. Jewish and pagan elements seem to be interwoven. The Jewish influence is evident in the references to observing suggested days, season, circumcision, and other Jewish practices (Colossians 2:16-17). In some circles of Judaism there was a strong belief in the mediatorship and power of the angels. The Qumran community attached a great deal of importance to the angel’s names and their roles in the affairs of the world.

The pagan influences at work in Colossae are reflected in beliefs that certain “elements of the world” or angelic beings were in control of the universe (Colossians 2:8,20). These “elements of the world” were a series of intermediaries between God and the universe. Each was considered to contain part of the “fullness of the Godhead” (Colossians 1:19; 2:9). They were the cause of creation (Colossians 1:15-17). They also shared control over various areas of the earth and over the destinies of men.

Paul had to counter the dangerous tendencies by pointing out the all-sufficiency of Christ in His role in the universe. He had to point out that the “fullness of the Godhead” was not shared by a multitude of intermediaries: all the fullness of God and His power was in Christ himself (1:19; 2:3,9). By His death on the cross, Christ had won a victory over all the forces that were considered to control the universe. In Old Testament wisdom literature Paul found proof that the whole universe had been created and directed by the wisdom of God from the beginning; now this wisdom had been fully revealed in Christ (Colossians 1:15-20).

In our reading today we hear Paul tell us some of the general principles for a life in Christ.

12 Put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,

When you were baptized, you clothed yourself in Christ. This is a brief description of that clothing. These terms (chosen, holy, beloved) were also used in the Old Testament to describe Israel. As a baptized Christian they have entered the new Israel, a community of God’s people – their relations to one another should reflect this.

13 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.

Forgive as you have been forgiven. The petition of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12) may be in Paul’s mind (see [Ephesians 4:32](#)).

14 And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.

In verse 12 Paul told us to clothe ourselves in the attributes of Christ. Now we put on love (*agape*) as the final garment which covers all the others and binds them together. In the

Sermon on the Mount, God's great universal love is the supreme model for man "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

15 And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body.

This is a vivid portrayal of the compact community of brothers in Christ, who is the source of unity, peace and harmony.

And be thankful.

For this one body, this community (common unity), they must always be thankful.

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another,

The presence of Christ in the community will manifest itself by a wise use of words and song to encourage one another.

singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

As used here, this points out that even the singing is used for instruction of the community (one another). The instruction is for the whole community – they all have mutual responsibilities.

17 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.

Christians must recognize Jesus as Lord both in word and in action. In words, they will show this recognition best when they call upon Him in prayer as Lord. For Paul and the early Church, to say "do it in the name of the Lord" was a way of designating Christians. In the Old Testament "those who call on the name of the Lord: was a designation of sincere and pious Israelites; in the New Testament it is transferred to Christians (1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 9:14), and the object of it is Christ. The title once reserved for Yahweh has been transferred to Christ. "No one comes to the Father, but by Me" (John 14:16).

18 Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord.

The husband is to be the spiritual head of the household. 1 Peter 3:1-6 expresses this same sentiment where the underlying assumption is that the wife is Christian and the husband is pagan – she is to win him over through Christian obedience. Ephesians 5:22-24 again says the same where the assumption is that both husband and wife are Christian. The root of this teaching is Genesis 3:16 and it is echoed again in 1 Timothy 2:12.

19 Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them.

This theme is also expanded and expounded in 1 Peter 3:7 and Ephesians 5:25-31. God gave Eve to Adam as his inseparable companion and compliment (Genesis 2:18); she was therefore duty-bound to live in peace and with him. Man and woman have different, although complimentary, roles in family life; they are equal in dignity. The family needs a center of authority, and that authority belongs to the husband, in accordance with God's design (1 Corinthians 11:3,12-14).

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord.

The 4th commandment: "Honor your father and mother."

21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

In every family there should be an "educational exchange" between parents and children (Ephesians 6:1-4) in which each gives and receives. "It is the duty of parents to create a family atmosphere inspired by love and devotion to God and their fellow man which will promote an integrated, personal and social education of their children" (Vatican II, *Gravissimum educationis*).

Optional 2nd Reading - 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24

The first letter of John is believed to have been written sometime between A.D. 57 and 62 from Ephesus. Although there is no opening greeting or signature, Saint John's authorship is apparent from the content. In fact, the letter has very much the same tone as the fourth gospel and has even been described as a sort of introduction to it. The essence of this letter deals with the love of God and of the brethren which are the hallmark of the Christian. Saint Jerome tells us that when John was a very old man his only message was "little children, love one another." And when his disciples asked him why he was always saying the same thing he always replied, "My children, this is what the Lord commands; if we do this, nothing else is necessary."

3:1 See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.

In the truest and most absolute sense, God's gift of love has been the gift of his only Son as Savior of the world (see John 3:16). It is this gift which has opened heaven and allows us to approach God as His children to seek forgiveness for our transgressions. Because of this gift we can be called "children of God" rather than "servants or slaves of God" as was the condition of the chosen people after the sin of the golden calf.

Yet so we are.

Sonship with God is not only something which will be achieved at the end of time, it is something which we have achieved already (see Romans 8:14-17). “To be called” means the same as “to be called by God”, and in the language of the Bible, when God gives someone name he is not simply conferring a title but is causing the thing to be what the name indicates (for example, Genesis 17:5). The word of God is efficacious, it does what it says it will do. This is why Saint John adds “Yet so we are.”

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

The image of God which is manifested to the Christian in this life is seen through the eyes of faith; in the next life the image we will see is much more intimate and immediate.

“Beatitude consists of two things – that we shall behold God such as He is in His own nature and substance; and that we ourselves shall become, as it were, gods. For those who enjoy God while they retain their own nature, assume certain admirable and almost divine form, so as to seem gods rather than men.” [*Saint Pius V Catechism*, I,13,7]

²¹ Beloved, if (our) hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God ²² and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

If we are not conscious of having sinned (we have kept His commandments and done what pleases Him), we can be confident of God’s favor.

²³ And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,

In Semitic usage, the “name” is equivalent to the person. Faith is not simply the acceptance of a proposition, but a total personal commitment to a person.

and love one another just as he commanded us.

The commandments are summed up in faith and love, which is the theme of the final part of this epistle. Faith and love cannot be separated (see Galatians 5:6); our Lord Himself told us what would mark His disciples out – their love for one another (John 13:34-35).

“We cannot rightly love one another unless we believe in Christ; nor can we truly believe in the name of Jesus Christ without brotherly love.” [*Saint Bede the Venerable* (ca. A.D. 700), *On 1 John*]

²⁴ Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.

Not only does obedience to the commandments guarantee continued communion with God, we have the further guarantee of the divine presence in the possession of the Holy Spirit which is mentioned here for the first time in this epistle.

Gospel - Luke 2:41-52

Nothing brings a family closer together than a crisis, especially a crisis which involves a child who is lost. Today we hear of such a crisis involving the Holy Family as we hear of the finding in the Temple. This is an event which is reported only by St. Luke; a mystery which we celebrate as the fifth joyful mystery of the rosary.

⁴¹ Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover,

The Law prescribed the Jerusalem pilgrimage for three major feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14; Deuteronomy 16:16); but custom excused those who lived at a distance from all but the Passover. The rabbis were not in agreement whether or not women and children were required to make the pilgrimage, but males aged 12 and over were required to make it. The distance the Holy Family would have traveled (from Nazareth to Jerusalem) is about 60 miles as the crow flies; 85 miles by road.

⁴² and when he was twelve years old,

A year before the age at which a boy officially reached manhood; the event is celebrated today with the ceremony of the bar mitzvah

they went up according to festival custom. ⁴³ After they had completed its days,

The celebration of the Passover meal began a week-long feast of the unleavened bread.

as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Thinking that he was in the caravan,

Entire villages joined in the pilgrimages, breaking up into two groups; one of men, the other of women. Children could go with either group. This explains how they could go a day's journey before they discovered the Child was missing when the families regrouped to camp.

they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances,

Their fellow pilgrims from Nazareth

⁴⁵ but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple,

In Hebrew numerology, three is the number of completeness. This is a possible symbolic reference to the three days which Jesus is to spend in the tomb.

sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, ⁴⁷ and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers.

In one of the outer courts of the Temple, which is where the teachers usually taught. Listeners used to sit at their feet, now and again asking questions and responding to them. This is what Jesus did, but his questions and answers attracted the teachers' attention, He was so wise and well informed. The way this story is recounted, it implies that Jesus was in the center of a circle or group (the position of the teacher) and the teachers had assumed the position of the students. He knows the Torah and its interpretations; this is not in opposition to Jewish Law or practice.

⁴⁸ 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."

Imagine the thoughts which ran through the minds of Mary and Joseph when they realized that they had lost track of the Son of God (a fact of which they have been aware since the Annunciation), who was placed into their care by God Himself.

⁴⁹ And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

The Greek can also be translated "about my Father's business". It implies a close personal relationship between Jesus and the Father. These are the first words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel. They form an explanation and they clearly show His divine Sonship; and they also show His determination to fulfill the will of His Eternal Father.

⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them.

Mary and Joseph realized that His reply contained a deeper meaning which they did not grasp. They did not understand the full implication of what divine Sonship entailed, that His relationship to God takes precedence over His relationship to them. One of a parent's greatest sorrows afflicts Mary; not to understand her own child; one of the swords spoken of by Simeon (Luke 2:35).

⁵¹ He went down with them

Literally, down in elevation. Jerusalem is located on a mountaintop.

and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them;

Jesus lived like any other inhabitant of Nazareth, working at the same trade as Saint Joseph and earning His living by the sweat of His brow. This is the last reference to Saint Joseph in the Gospels and is a beautiful tribute to him: obedient to his guidance, Jesus grew to perfect manhood.

and his mother kept all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus advanced (in) wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

Jesus grew in all ways – physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually – for the work that lay ahead of Him.

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