

Cycle C The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Reading 1 SIR 3:2-6, 12-14

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.

Responsorial Psalm PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

R. (cf. 1) 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.

R. 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.

R. 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.

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

Reading COL 3:12-17

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.

Gospel LK 2:41-52

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.

During these days, these holy days of Christmas time, a question comes to mind, a question to which we all know the answer, but asking it causes us to focus our thoughts among all of the distractions of this holiday season: Does God long to belong?

The reality behind all of the images of these Christmas days is that of God coming to us in order to belong. God comes to us in love, an inviting love that calls us to belong to Him. Philosophers and theologians speak in abstract language using rather dry and remote mental concepts. The images of these Christmas days are very warm, very human, images that reach our hearts, touching them with the language of love.

We began with John the Baptist calling us to prepare, to set aside all of our busy-ness and concerns of this world and prepare for what God is going to do for us. You see, it's not about what we are doing for God, important as that is. The real thing that's happening is that God is coming to us, offering Himself to us in His only-begotten Son. It's all about God seeking us out; God coming to us in love.

Then there is Mary six months pregnant traveling some distance to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Artists have painted masterpieces about the Visitation. In that event there was a mysterious meeting of the Christ child and John the Baptist, both of them still in the wombs of their mothers. God the Son comes to John the Baptist even before they are born! John the Baptist leaps in his mother's womb. What an extraordinary reaching out that was.

Then God, having taken on human flesh in Mary's womb, is born among us. Amazing events surround that event. Angels from on high descend to our earth. Lowly shepherds living near Bethlehem, not the powerful elite living in Jerusalem, are the first to encounter the Christ child. Heaven comes to earth in a most unexpected way and place.

God is reaching out to humans in an extraordinary way, far beyond any of our human expectations.

Love does that. Love is driven to seek union. God's love, God's longing for belonging, is infinitely beyond anything we might imagine. If the events surrounding the birth of Christ seem to be unreal, it is because they are. They are totally beyond anything the human mind understands to be real.

The central image now comes into focus. It is the image of a baby being held in his mother's arms while Joseph, their protector, stands near. What deeper belonging could there be?

Is there anything that speaks to us of belonging that is greater than this picture, a picture of a reality far above and beyond anything that we can rationalize with our minds? What could possibly be more a more powerful statement of God's longing to belong than this? The bond of intimacy between a mother and her child is something that is clearly understood in any culture at any time anywhere in the world. No belonging is deeper or stronger than this.

All that we have just looked at is only the beginning. God's self-expression of Himself to us, having come to us in the birth of His Son, goes on to cause His Son to enter into and fully engage our world and that dark forces that roam throughout our world. And how does Jesus do that? He calls twelve simple men to draw near to Him and living in a belonging, a bonded community, of disciples. Our Messiah accomplished His mission through belonging.

Isn't that what our Church is all about – calling us to belong, calling us to bring others into our family of faith? Isn't that what our parish is all about – bring us together around God's family table, the altar on which Jesus Christ offers Himself to us here in our family

room, our parish church? He comes to us to belong to us in Holy Communion, a union with God like no other.

It's important for us, I think, to pay attention to these images and the big picture of these Christmas Holy Days. It's no secret that what it means to be a family is undergoing a redefinition right now in our culture. No longer is the term "family" applied strictly to a household with mom, dad and the children all living together in the same home at the same time. As a matter of fact what is known as the nuclear family, or traditional family, is now in the minority. We have now various arrangements found in single parent families, in families in which the parents are of the same gender, and in families in which one parent is simply living with a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

So how can we model ourselves after the Holy Family? After all, we are not the extraordinary people found in today's readings, living among the extraordinary events in which they lived. How does their model apply to us? The answer, I think, is to recognize that they lived fully dedicated to their faith. They lived out their religious practices and then went far beyond. They lived in wonder, in the wondrous recognition of all of the comings of God to them and responded by always seeking out God, by always living in the wonder of His presence.

Much needs to be done to build up and buttress our present-day families. A holistic and holy family is integrated, not fractured; other-centered, not self-centered; lives in forgiveness, affirms the uniqueness of each of its members; builds up instead of tears down; is mindful of God and not neglectful of His Presence and love.