

Feast of the Holy Family - B

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 30 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 can not 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 fourth commandment (Exodus 20:12). Fidelity to this commandment also atones for sins.

Optional 1st Reading - Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3

After the fall of our first parents, God announced that a savior would redeem mankind from the power of Satan. One of the first steps toward the fulfillment of this promise was God's choice of Abram (later renamed Abraham), whose faith would make him the father of a great people. God told Abram "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you" (Genesis 12:1-3). This is a three-fold promise of blessing: 1) Nationhood; 2) Name (which is dynasty or kingdom); and 3) Worldwide blessing. Our reading of today is the actions immediately preceding the formation of a covenant with God concerning the first promise, a covenant which is fulfilled in Moses; the second promise is sealed by covenant in Genesis 17:1-19, a covenant which is fulfilled in David; and the third promise is sealed by covenant in Genesis 22, a covenant which finds fulfillment in Jesus the Christ.

^{15:1} Some time after these events, this word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what good will your gifts be, if I keep on being childless and have as my heir the steward of my house, Eliezer?"

It was socially and legally acceptable at the time for childless parents to appoint as their heir either an adopted son or the child of a concubine. The name Eliezer means "God his help."

³ Abram continued, "See, you have given me no offspring, and so one of my servants will be my heir." ⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to him: "No, that one shall not be your heir; your own issue shall be your heir."

God rejects the possibility of adopting Eliezer in order to have an heir and instead states that Abram shall father a son. At this time Abram is about 85 years old and Sari, his wife, is no spring chicken either.

⁵ He took him outside and said: "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so," he added, "shall your descendants be." ⁶ Abram put his faith in the LORD, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

This is not salvation by faith alone, Abram has been obedient to God since Genesis 12 when he was told to leave the home of his kinfolk. Abram's obedience to his faith in God is what merits credit as an act of righteousness. In between where this verse leaves off and where we rejoin the narrative in Chapter 21, Abram sires a son through Sari's maidservant Hagar (means "flight" or "stranger") who is also rejected by God, thus rejecting the second possibility of creating an heir through a concubine.

^{21:1} The LORD took note of Sarah as he had said he would; he did for her as he had promised.

At this point Abraham (Abram's and Sari's names were changed in Chapter 17) is 100 years old.

² Sarah became pregnant and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time that God had stated. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to this son of his whom Sarah bore him.

The name Isaac means "laughter." When Abraham had been told by God a year earlier that he and Sarah would be parents of a son, Sarah laughed (Genesis 18:10-15).

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).

“Now what Paul wishes to say is that there is no benefit in those things, for all those things fall apart, unless they are done with love. This is the love that binds them all together. Whatever good thing it is that you mention, if love be absent, it is nothing, it melts away. The analogy is like a ship; though its rigging be large, yet if it lacks girding ropes, it is of no service. Or it is similar to a house; if there are no tie beams, of what use is the house? Think of a body, though its bones be large, if it lacks ligaments, the bones cannot support the body. In the same way, whatever good our deeds possess will vanish completely if they lack love.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 400) *Homilies on the Epistle to the Colossians* 9]

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).

“Observe again that Paul has exhorted husbands and wives to reciprocity. As with wives toward husbands, here too he enjoins fear and love. For it is possible for one who loves to be bitter. What Paul says then is this: Don’t fight; for nothing is more bitter than fighting in marriage, when it takes place on the part of the husband toward the wife. For disputes between people who love another are bitter. These arise from great bitterness, when, Paul says, any one disagrees with his own member. To love, therefore, is the husband’s part, to yield pertains to the other side. If, then, each one contributes his own part, all stand firm. From being loved, the wife too becomes loving; and from her being submissive, the husband learns to yield.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 400) *Homilies on the Epistle to the Colossians* 10]

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 - Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

The date of composition of the letter to the Hebrews is not known but we can deduce that it was written prior to A.D. 70 because it warns the Christian against the temptation of returning to the ancient Levitical form of worship; a form of worship which disappeared with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is obviously written to a people who are steeped in the Old Testament, people who in all probability are converts from Judaism, and who may previously have even been priests or Levites. After becoming Christians, because of the persecutions of the time, they had to abandon Jerusalem, the holy city, and seek refuge in some coastal city such as Caesarea or Antioch. In their exile they look back with nostalgia on the splendor of the cult they had played a part in prior to their conversion. They feel discouraged and are tempted to give up their new faith, in which they are not yet well grounded.

To bolster their sagging faith, the sacred writer reminds them that final salvation, to which their faith leads them (and us), can only happen after death, when man sees God face-to-face, to the degree which God’s charity allows – in other words, to the extent that the Christian has put his faith into practice. Chapter 11, from which our reading for today comes gives an impressive account of the saints of the Old Testament, who were men of heroic faith, confident of the day when the divine promises would be fulfilled. Through the suffering, difficulties and obstacles they experienced in this life, and which they accepted with an unshakeable faith, they eventually attained the reward which God had promised them. Our reading for today concentrates on the faith of Abraham.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go.

Abraham’s faith is exemplified by his obedience to God’s command to migrate to Canaan (Genesis 12:1, 4)

¹¹ By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age--and Sarah herself was sterile--for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy.

Abraham’s faith also allowed him to produce an heir with Sarah, even though both were well past normal childbearing years. As we heard in our first alternate reading, Abraham’s faith was tested as he tried to convince God to declare an heir either by adoption or by the offspring of a concubine. It was only through Sarah that a righteous offspring would be produced.

¹² So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.

It was through Abraham’s obedience to faith that his descendants would possess the land, although

he would only be a sojourner in it (Genesis 15:16, 18), and would eventually become too numerous to count.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name."

The last example given of Abraham's obedient faith is the case of his obedience to the command to offer Isaac in sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-19). His readiness to do so is particularly striking because his hopes for the fulfillment of God's promise were bound up with Isaac.

¹⁹ He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

Since Isaac didn't actually die, it is likely that the sacred author sees Isaac's deliverance from death as a symbol or type of the resurrection of Christ.

Gospel -Luke 2:22-40

Tradition tells us that Saint Luke was born in the Antioch of Syria. This suggests that he was of a Gentile rather than Jewish origin. This possibility appears to be borne out in Colossians 4:10-14 where Saint Paul singles some out as being "of the circumcision:" "Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas . . . and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God . . . Epaphras, who is one of yourselves . . . Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you."

When Saint Luke became a Christian is unknown, quite possibly it was very early in the formation of the Church, but he states very early in his gospel account that he was not an eyewitness to the life of our Lord. The Acts of the Apostles, which Saint Luke also wrote, show him as a disciple and companion of Saint Paul; with some events being reported in the first person plural, implying that he himself took part in them.

From the very beginning the Church has always regarded Saint Luke's Gospel as a sacred book: it was used for liturgical reading and is found in the earliest lists of books which the Church considers to be inspired by God. In the fourth century, the Council of Laodicea (sometime between A.D. 343 and 381) stated that only certain books could be read out in church and included in this listing were the "four Gospels according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, according to John." The same regulations, with some changes in which books were included (so that they conform to what we know as the canon today), were issued by the Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397). It is believed that Saint Luke's Gospel was written in the year A.D. 62 or at the beginning of 63.

Almost half of the content of Saint Luke's Gospel is not to be found in the other Gospels. Among the important items exclusive to Luke are: his account of Jesus' infancy, his setting of many episodes of Jesus' public ministry within the framework of a long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, certain parables, and the account of the appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples at Emmaus.

Today we hear from his account of Jesus' infancy.

Our gospel reading stresses the holy family's strict obedience to the Law of Moses. Luke 2:21 says "When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." The requirement for circumcision is found in Genesis 17:12. Circumcision is the sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, a mark which designates that they belong to God's chosen people.

Although not mentioned in our gospel reading today, Exodus 13:11-13 requires the sacrifice of all firstborn males (either of the flock or the family), with the provision that donkeys and sons shall be redeemed with a lamb, or if not redeemed its neck shall be broken. Numbers 18:16 states that the redemption shall take place at the age of one month and places a price of five silver shekels (a shekel is about 11 ½ grams or \$10.00 at today's prices) as the price of redemption.

²² When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses,

Although the text is correctly translated as "their purification," only Mary required purification. Mary's uncleanness was not moral but only ceremonial. Leviticus 12:2-4 declares that a woman who has conceived and borne a son is ritually unclean. Mary is seen as being united with Jesus, and possibly with Joseph, in the Temple ceremony. Just as Jesus followed the full Mosaic Law and completely immersed Himself in humanity, Mary is presented as one with all womankind in giving birth to her child.

they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,²³ just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord,"

Jesus' presentation in the Temple is in accordance with Exodus 13:1-16.

²⁴ and to offer the sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Rather than a year-old lamb, Mary and Joseph give the "offering of the poor"; one bird was for a holocaust of adoration, the other for a sin offering (see Leviticus 12:6-8; 5:7-10).

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout,

The name Simeon means "hearing." The adjectives which describe Simeon show that he took care in observing the moral obligations of the Law, a care which springs from a healthy fear of the Lord.

awaiting the consolation of Israel,

According to rabbinical tradition, the "consolation of Israel" was the final, unrecorded words that passed between Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:11) and that this would be made known when Elijah reappeared (Luke 1:17).

and the holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he

should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord.

God is at work in saving His people.

²⁷ He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, ²⁸ he took him into his arms and blessed God,

The rabbis took children into their arms in order to bless them. The Greek word *edexato* implies that Simeon “received” what was being presented to him.

saying: ²⁹ "Now, Master, you may let your servant go

This implies the difficult service of Simeon’s days in the Temple.

in peace, according to your word,

Simeon is the watchman who is released from duty. He was most probably a member of, or at least was closely associated with, the Sadducee group and must have waited amid great suffering as he witnessed the priestly betrayal of many sacred obligations.

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,

The universal scope of salvation reflects Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 52:10.

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."

Revelation under the image of light is especially used in the writings of John. When the glory of the Lord descended upon the ark of the covenant, Moses could not enter lest he die (Exodus 33:18-20; 40:35); having seen the glory, Simeon can die peacefully.

³³ The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; ³⁴ and Simeon blessed them

He proclaimed the fulfillment of Messianic blessings in them and announced their involvement in the continuation of these blessings among other men.

and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel,

This is probably a reference to an idea found in Isaiah 8:14 and Isaiah 28:16. The goals and goodness, preached and lived by the Messiah, force all men to face up to their great sinfulness (their fall). This knowledge can completely destroy, as it does the proud; or it can prompt the humble to turn to the Messiah and through Him to rise to a new life. Everywhere else in Luke the Greek word translated as rise, *anastasis*, is used exclusively for resurrection from the dead (Luke 14:14; 20:27, 33, 35).

and to be a sign that will be contradicted ³⁵ (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the

thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

The words Simeon addresses to Mary announce that she will be intimately linked with her Son's redemptive work. The sword indicates that Mary will have a share in her Son's sufferings; hers will be an unspeakable pain which pierces her soul. Our Lord suffered on the cross for the sins of all mankind, and it is those sins which forge the sword of Mary's pain.

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna,

Rabbinical literature recognized seven (the number of the covenant) prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. The Bible also mentions that the wife of the prophet Isaiah was called a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). These women witnessed to God's will, at least by holiness of life, sometimes by speaking in His name. The name Anna means "grace" or "favor."

the daughter of Phanuel,

The name Phanuel means "face of God."

of the tribe of Asher.

There is little known of the tribe of Asher as nothing is recorded beyond its holding a place in the list of the tribes (Genesis 35:26; 46:17; Exodus 1:4, etc.). Asher and Simeon were the only tribes west of the Jordan which furnished no hero or judge for the nation; at least until Anna the prophetess came along. The name Asher means "good luck."

She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. ³⁸ And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

The holy city represents all of the elect. Anna's testimony is very similar to Simeon's; like him, she too has been awaiting the coming of the Messiah her whole life, in faithful service to God, and she too is rewarded with the joy of seeing Him. The birth of Jesus the Christ was revealed by three kinds of witness in three different ways: 1) by the shepherds, after the angel's announcement; 2) by the magi, who were guided by the star; and 3) by Simeon and Anna who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. All of us who, like Simeon and Anna, persevere in piety and in the service of God, no matter how insignificant their lives may seem in the eyes of others, become instruments of the Holy Spirit who uses us to make the Christ known to others.

³⁹ When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

Before their return to Nazareth, Saint Matthew tells us that the Holy Family fled to Egypt where they stayed for some time (Matthew 2:13-23).

⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ as a child, that is, as one clothed in the fragility of human nature, had to grow and become stronger but as the eternal Word of God he had no need to become stronger or to grow. Hence he is rightly described as full of wisdom and grace [favor].” [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 710), *In Lucae Evangelium expositio, in loc.*]