

Holy Family - A
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14;
Colossians 3:12-21;
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
Little Flower - 12/29/19

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Each year the Feast of the Holy Family invites us to reflect on family.

Today's reading from Sirach has great relevance in today's world. Sirach challenged his readers to take care of their elderly parents even if their minds failed. Living in a world where people live longer and many suffer from dementia, many families experience role reversal. Adult children are put in a position of caring for their parents although they often have their own children to take care of and, as they get older, their own health problems. On the 4th Sunday of Advent, I mentioned the book *Holiness is Wholeness* and living in right relationships with God, others, the world, and ourselves. When we need to help our parents more, it is very important that we strive to maintain a healthy balance in our own lives.

Writing about the relationship between adult children and their elderly parents, Sirach stressed the importance of extended family. Families are more than just parents and their children. Many years ago, a well known Catholic writer wrote a cautionary tale about his family's journey. When he and his wife married, they moved from Pennsylvania to California for what seemed to be great personal and professional opportunities. Later in life, however, they were not so sure they made the right choice. They were not able to learn from their parents how to age gracefully. Likewise, they were not there to help their parents when their parents needed help. In the end, they felt that they had cheated their children. Seeing grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins once or twice a year did not create deep family bonds. Finally, their own children moved away from them. Sirach offers a simple message: extended family is important.

Today's Gospel tells the story of the flight into Egypt. I think we sometimes romanticize the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The Holy Family did not have an easy life. First, the worlds of Joseph and Mary were upended when Mary became pregnant. Even in the best of circumstances, pregnancies are challenging and change lives. Although she was pregnant herself, Mary traveled to the hill country to care for Elizabeth for three months. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census when Mary was almost ready to give birth certainly could not have been easy nor could giving birth in a cave or stable. The flight into Egypt also would have been arduous. The Holy Family had a hard life, a challenging life. The truth is that there are times when every family's life is difficult and challenging.

Finally, the Advent readings gave me a new insight into the Holy Family. For both Mary and Joseph, doing God's will was paramount. When the angel announced to Mary that God had chosen her to be the mother of his Son, although she questioned how this could happen, she faithfully and generously accepted God's will for her: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word*" [Lk. 1:38]. When Joseph was going to divorce Mary because of her pregnancy, "*he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home*" [Mt. 1:24]. Likewise, he took the Holy Family into Egypt and brought them back at the command of the Lord. Scripture suggests that marriages and families would be stronger if all of us tried to discern and obey God's will at every point in our lives, especially when major decisions have to be made.

My brothers and sisters, marriages, families, and relationships are all messy and complex, and they always will be. The best we can do to minimize the messiness and complexity is to live today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Colossians, especially the final verse: "*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.*"