

Feast of the Holy Family - A

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.

1st Reading - Sirach 3:2-6, 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, it will serve as a sin offering -- it will take lasting root.

The sin offering is offered in purification after childbirth (Leviticus 12:6,8), purification from leprosy (Leviticus 14:19,22,31), purification from contact with death (Numbers 6:11,14,16), and purification from bodily uncleanness (Leviticus 15:15,30). Note that all these faults are committed unwittingly; there is no ritual atonement or expiation for sin committed with full and deliberate malice. Forgiveness for such sins is obtained only by repentance.

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*).

Gospel - Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

The story of the visit of the wise men and the flight into Egypt is contained only in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew's gospel makes the point that Jesus Messiah is the new Moses and the new Israel, and the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. This thesis could only be directed at a Jewish audience. As such, the second chapter of Matthew emphasizes the parallel life which Jesus had like Moses: both survived the slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2:16 = Exodus 1:22), both had to flee (Matthew 2:14 = Exodus 2:15), both returned (Matthew 2:19 = Exodus 4:19), both led the people out of slavery and to the promised land (Moses to the Land of Canaan, Jesus to the New Jerusalem). Today we hear of the escape of the Holy Family into Egypt.

¹³ When they [the magi] had departed,

Greek: *magoi*. Originally this term designated the learned priestly caste of the Persians; later it came to mean anyone skilled in occult knowledge and power (much like our "magician" which is derived from the same word). The mention of the star in Matthew's gospel shows they were called *magoi* because of their knowledge of astrology, hence the identification is some translations as astrologers.

behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." ¹⁴ Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. ¹⁵ He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Hosea 11:1. The reference is to the basic experience of salvation, the exodus from Egyptian bondage. Jesus is presented as reenacting in his own life the career not only of Moses but of all Israel, for He leads the New Israel.

¹⁹ When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said,

This story is the last we will hear of Joseph in Matthew's gospel.

"Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."

This is a command which closely resembles the command given to Moses in Exodus 4:19.

²¹ He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. ²³ He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazorean."

The text which is quoted is found nowhere in the Old Testament. Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. The most probable explanation of the quotation is that it is a wordplay based on the Hebrew text of Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot shall rise from Jesse, and a branch (*nezer*) shall sprout from his roots." St. Jerome himself, in his *Commentary on Isaiah 11:1*, stated that the name "Nazorean" fulfills the prophecy as Christ is the branch (*nezer*) of the entire race of Abraham and David.

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