

Feast of the Holy Family – The Sunday after Christmas.

1st Reading: Ecclesiasticus/Sirach 3:2-6+12-14: Respect for elderly parents;

2nd Reading: Colossians 3:12-21: Qualities that make a good family life;

Gospel: Luke 2:41-52: The finding of the child of Jesus in the Temple.

(Note; there are alternative readings; those above are the commonest selection.)

Happy Christmas & New Year! I fear these traditional greetings may sound very hollow to many families in Gaza, Israel, Ukraine and even Russia. As I have often said, the only saving grace about war is that it gives us a sense of the worry and tension in the Middle East at the time of Jesus' birth. You may well ask what the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph has to do with people's worries this winter: I have no easy answer to this, but I hope I can offer you a couple of useful ideas.

First, Sunday's gospel is the story of the 12-year-old Jesus being found in the Temple, where he seems to have left behind after a family visit to Jerusalem for the Passover. Their society was very different from ours, in that parents would often leave children with extended family for days at a time - for instance, during this sort of outing to Jerusalem, where Mary & Joseph "*supposed he was with the group*". Luke implies that they only grew worried when they saw he was not with "the group", so they had to return to Jerusalem, where they found him "*sitting among the teachers*". (Jesus was about to go through the Jewish 'coming of age' ceremony, so it would have been natural for him to speak to learned men. In this case, the experts "*were amazed at his understanding and answers*".) The parents were unhappy, and Mary said bluntly: "*Why have you treated us so? We have been searching for you in great distress.*" Jesus replied to this heart-felt question: "*Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's House?*" You can interpret this either as adolescent cheek, or (better) as an early, mysterious awareness of divinity. Mary & Joseph did not pursue the matter (or have a blazing row); all went home to Nazareth, where Jesus "*was submissive to them*". In other words, even as the Son of God, he accepted their authority. Back home, Jesus "*increased in wisdom & stature, and in favour with God and man.*" His adolescent years saw him mature in a really pleasant way.

The second idea: if the boy Jesus grew to maturity with them, what sort of home-life were they creating at Nazareth? In what sort of atmosphere do we want our own children to mature? There is a useful clue in the 2nd reading, from Colossians. This is often chosen for weddings (even though St Paul was

not known for women's lib!) as it describes how family members should relate to one-another. He uses the metaphor of putting on clothes to describe the virtues of family life. (This can sound rather rude at times!) Imagine getting dried after a bath or shower; you first put in soft cotton "undies" (I did say it was risqué!) Paul writes: "*Put on...compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness & patience.*" These are easy, even soft things – the simplest of virtues that we need for any civilized living. They are things any normal parents teach their children, and practise among themselves. I am sure this would have been done at Nazareth.

Next, comes the tougher stuff – the equivalent of our suits, dresses, jackets, jumpers, etc - "*Bearing with one another...and forgiving each other. As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*" That, I suggest, is harder. Tolerating each other's foibles (and even bad habits) is a strain on relationships, and needs a lot of patience, especially in difficult times. Paul then concludes: "*Above all these, put on love.*" That is like a top-coat, anorak, waterproof, or whatever keeps us warm and dry. This sort of all-protecting love is far more than just an emotional feeling (though that usually comes into it) – it is a decision or commitment that we will put the other person's happiness and well-being ahead of our own – as Jesus did. In other words, when the other person is happy, we are, too. The same applies to times when they are worried or sad. This type of "top-coat" love is the basis of any happy marriage or family life, and demands an unselfish attitude by each of us.

I hope that these ideas have been useful. I know that times are not easy, and that the relevance of some church feasts is not always easy to spot. Also, Holy Family tends to be lost in the general haze (alcoholic or otherwise!) of the post-Christmas week. Anyway, Fathers Jeff and Paul, the parish workers and I wish you and your families all the best for New Year. The wars that dominate our TV screens make everything feel muted this year; we hope for more peaceful times ahead. God bless. *Fr Jim Dunne.*