

Bible Study

Feast of the Holy Family, cycle C

Opening Prayer: (Sign of the Cross) “Lord Jesus, you are Emmanuel, God with us – at this very time, in this very place, and for all eternity. Bless our families and all those whom we love. Fill our hearts with joy and peace as we reflect now upon your words of love in Sacred Scripture. Help us to learn how to live and to love as you did. We ask this of the Father in your name. Amen.”

Focusing Questions

1. What sort of family time did you have this week? Did any of it feel like holy time?
2. “Honor your father and your mother.” What does that mean to you, in practical terms?

Commentary before the First Reading: Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

The Book of Sirach was written a relatively short time before the birth of Jesus. The original Hebrew writing has been lost, but the Greek translation by the author’s grandson lives on. Because the only version exists in Greek, it is not included in Orthodox Jewish Scriptures nor in the basic canon for Protestant Bibles. It is interesting, and perhaps significant, where Ben Sirach placed this section about the family within his book about faithful Jewish life. Immediately *before* it he has words of wisdom about one’s duties toward God, and immediately *after* it there is a section about living with humility. In a common Hebrew style of writing, he uses many parallels, repeating a thought in slightly different words in order to give it emphasis.

Read the First Reading aloud.

1. By speaking of the authority of both parents in the first sentence, what is Sirach saying about which has the greater authority, father or mother?
2. What is the divine reward for a person who honors his mother?
3. And what is the reward for a person who honors his father?
4. How might one “grieve” (cause grief or sadness to) an elderly parent?
5. State the point of verse 14 in your own words.
6. Justice is an act that is simply the right way to treat another. What does this reading have to do with justice?

Commentary before the Second Reading: 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24

(There are two options for the Second Reading on this feast day. Since we will reflect on the reading from Colossians next year, we will reflect on the second option this year.) There is a proverb which states that children will love in the same way in which they experience love in their home. In this reading Saint John is speaking about the “family of God,” not the nuclear family of parents and children. However, the basic wisdom applies equally to both; look for that. A word of caution: it is easy to misread verse 21; “heart” in this context means “actions based on one’s emotions.”

Read the Second Reading aloud.

1. Who is the “him” referred to in verse 2? How did we become His children, since we are not born that way?
2. According to verse 1, why are some people not able to recognize Christians as being children of God? Can you think of other reasons as well?
3. Which sentence points out that love is not a passive emotion, but rather an active way of living?
4. Identify the 2 ways that Saint John’s says we will respond authentically to experiencing God’s love for us?
5. How can the words of this reading be applied to family life?

Commentary before the Gospel Reading: Luke 2:41-52

The Feast of the Holy Family is relatively new in the Church’s history, having been established in the early 20th century. Not only did the Church wish to emphasize the important of the family and to present the Holy Family as an ideal which all human families should strive to imitate, but it also reflects the importance of family relationships that people experience during this Christmas season in so many of the world’s cultures. It might seem strange to hear a story about Jesus as a 12-year old today, when we heard the story of his birth a few days ago and a week from now we will hear about the visit of the Magi when Jesus was roughly 2 years old. However, the point of the story transcends that paradox and fits very well the overall theme of this feast day.

Read the Gospel Reading aloud.

1. Do you have a favorite line in this story? If you do, read it aloud.
2. How do we know from this story that Mary and Joseph were faithful in observing the Jewish laws and customs? How did that affect Jesus later on in his life?
3. Would you say that the group traveling from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover was large or small? On what do you base that conclusion?
4. Which aspect of Jesus' discussion with the rabbis and scribes at the temple was most fascinating to them?
5. Would you say that Jesus' response to his parents' scolding showed disrespect, childlike innocence, or knowledge beyond his years? Comment on your answer.
6. As a parent, how would you have dealt with Jesus' staying behind to talk to the elders of his faith?
7. It took the 3 days to find Jesus. Which other time in the Gospels did Mary suffer for 3 days, worrying about what had happened to her Son? Do you think it is a coincidence that Saint Luke presented the story this way?
8. With this story, Saint Luke's account of Jesus' childhood ends – in the temple. Look back to Luke 1:5. Where did it begin? Now look at Luke 21:37, the last detail before Luke's narration of the Passion. It is not a mere coincidence! What do you think Luke was emphasizing with this arrangement of details?

Applying the Readings to our Daily Lives

1. These readings present an idealized model of Christian families. Identify various family values that are presented to us during these readings?
2. Which aspects of your own family experience are reflected in these readings?
3. How will our relationships with each other, even family members, be different after we die and how will they remain the same? Do you find that frustrating or hopeful?
4. The Church calls the family "the domestic Church." What does that term mean to you?
5. How does your parish foster healthy families? And in what ways could your parish better do that?
6. What would you like to do to strengthen your own family's bond of love?

Closing Prayer

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, your home in Nazareth was marked by love, faith, mutual respect, and compassion. Strengthen our families to be more like yours, in word and in action. Fill us with your Holy Spirit of goodness and make us holy. We ask this in your name, Lord Jesus, for you are the Incarnate God, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.