

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

LECTIONARY #17

READING I Sirach 3:2–6, 12–14

A reading from the Book of Sirach

God sets a father in **honor** over his children;
 a mother's **authority** he **confirms** over her sons.
 Whoever **honors** his father **atones** for sins,
 and **preserves** himself from them.
 When he **prays**, he is **heard**;
 he stores up **riches** who reveres his **mother**.
 Whoever **honors** his father is **gladdened** by children, and,
 when he **prays**, is **heard**.
 Whoever **reveres** his father will live a **long life**;
 he who **obeys** his father brings **comfort** to his mother.

My son, take **care** of your father when he is old;
 grieve him **not** as **long** as he lives.
 Even if his **mind** fail, be **considerate** of him;
revile him not all the **days** of his **life**;
kindness to a father will not be **forgotten**,
firmly planted against the **debt** of your sins
 —a **house** raised in justice to **you**.

Sirach = SEER-ak; SI-ruhk

Each set of phrases in this reading offers advice.

Note the parallels established by the repetition of the word "whoever." The word "and" serves a similar purpose. Each of these teachings is meant to be equal.

The advice in the second section, beginning here, is more familial, the words of a father to his son. You can proclaim it in this spirit.

There are options for today's readings. Contact your parish staff to learn which readings will be used.

READING I The Book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, is composed of fifty chapters of wisdom literature. Written between the years 200 and 175 bc by the Jewish scribe Ben Sira, the book contains ethical themes and poetic sayings that are similar to those found in the Book of Proverbs. Sirach's fundamental outlook on wisdom is that building up the quality of human relationships

will result in the realization that the fear of God is a central dynamic of wise relationships. In other words, constructing right relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, the young and the old, the rich and the poor ultimately leads to better reverence of God.

Sirach's pursuit of right relationship is abundantly clear in these short verses that come near the beginning of the book. A father is to command the honor of his children, and a mother is to have authority over her sons. It is not simply that honoring one's parents allows for good order in the

present, but it also "atones for sins" made in the past. Furthermore, not only are sins forgiven, but the honoring of one's parents also opens access for God to be able to hear the prayers that one utters. Thus, right relationship restores what has been broken in the past, strengthens bonds in the present moment, and prepares for the action of God in the future.

The wisdom of this reading that is imparted to us is of particular importance for today's families. Many families today are very fragile and are pushed and pulled by forces and commitments outside the

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 128:1–2, 3, 4–5 (1)

R. Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!

For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
blessed shall you be, and favored.

Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
in the recesses of your home;
your children like olive plants
around your table.

Behold, thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD.

The LORD bless you from Zion:
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

Colossians = kuh-LOSH-uhnz

A reading that speaks of the virtues of
building community.

Each of these qualities is worthwhile,
deserving emphasis.

This passage concludes with a note
of thanksgiving, a feeling to guide the
community as it builds.

READING II Colossians 3:12–21

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians

[Brothers and sisters:

Put on, as God's chosen ones, **holy and beloved,**
heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness,
and patience,

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.

And over **all these** put on **love,**
that is, the **bond** of perfection.

And let the **peace** of Christ control your **hearts,**
the **peace** into which you were also **called** in one body.

And be **thankful.**

Let the word of Christ **dwell** in you richly,
as in all wisdom you **teach** and **admonish** one another,
singing **psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs**
with **gratitude** in your hearts to God.

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.]

household. These challenges often make honor and respect difficult to manifest at home. Yet Sirach calls each member of the household to manifest care and concern for familial relationships. The more we work to honor the relationships of our households, the more we will come to revere God—"a house raised in justice to you," God. The same could be said for the "holy family" that is the Church. The more we labor to care for one another and extend compassion, the greater force will our communal prayer have in praising God our Father.

READING II Paul writes to the infant church in Colossae, a city east of Ephesus. Although he had never visited Colossae, Paul has been provided information that this Christian community is struggling to follow the faith. Specifically, many Christians have resumed former pagan practices and are worshipping false gods. They were also wrestling with the teaching that Jesus is truly divine and not simply the greatest of all prophets sent by God. Thus, throughout his letter Paul underscores the divine nature of Jesus.

In today's reading from Colossians, Paul reminds them that those who have been baptized in Christ have a new life to live; all former ways of living must be put aside. The attitudes that belong to Christians are the markings of holiness: "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience," with forgiveness and love being the capstones that lead to perfection. Furthermore, the gifts of peace and thanksgiving belong to those who hold fast to their unity in Christ's body. These Christian attitudes simply cannot coexist with former outlooks on life.

A challenging passage to proclaim: it reinforces codes of conduct common to Greco-Roman society but which Paul typically disdains. (Most scholars of early Christianity regard these verses as added later by someone other than the original author, likely a scribe.) Probably best to read this in a neutral tone.

The tone of this vivid and magical reading is nevertheless ominous—in that it is filled with omens.

Herod = HAYR-uhd

Slight pause between “Lord” and “appeared.”

Wives, be **subordinate** to your husbands,
as is proper in the Lord.
Husbands, love your **wives**,
and avoid any **bitterness** toward them.
Children, obey your **parents** in everything,
for this is **pleasing** to the Lord.
Fathers, do not **provoke** your children,
so they may not become **discouraged**.

[Shorter: Colossians 3:12–17]

GOSPEL Matthew 2:13–15, 19–23

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

When the **magi** had **departed**, **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.”
Joseph rose and took the **child** and his **mother** by **night**
and departed for **Egypt**.

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.

When **Herod** had **died**, **behold**,
the **angel** of the **Lord** appeared in a **dream**
to **Joseph** in **Egypt** and said,
“**Rise**, take the **child** and his **mother** and go to the **land**
of **Israel**,
for **those** who sought the **child’s** **life** are **dead**.” >>

Having established the general characteristics of what it means to pursue a Christian way of life that overflows in gratitude, as displayed in their response of praise and worship, Paul then turns to the relationships found within a family. If peaceful relations are to be found in the Church, then they must be found also in the Christian family. For this reason, Paul uses language such as wives being “subordinate” to their husbands, husbands avoiding all “bitterness” toward their wives, and children obeying parents in all things. Although we might find this language diffi-

cult to stomach in the twenty-first century, it is important to recognize that Paul is not interested in patriarchal power and control of wives and children, but rather, he believes that peace and harmony must reign in the domestic Church (the family) as well as in the worshipping assembly.

GOSPEL Matthew’s account of Jesus’ nativity concludes with Joseph’s dream that he should take Jesus and Mary to Egypt in order to escape the persecution of Herod. Inclusion of the journey of the Holy Family to and from Egypt

in Matthew’s Gospel makes perfect sense considering his audience of Jewish Christians. He wants to place the story of Jesus into the framework of the Exodus experience of Israel sojourning in Egypt to avoid famine and returning to Canaan through the guidance of God’s grace. Matthew makes it clear that such a story fulfills the prophecy of Hosea, quoting: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (see Hos 11:1). Joseph follows God’s command to remain in Egypt until all is made safe for their return to Israel, information that is imparted by an angel to Joseph in yet another dream.

Archelaus = ahr-kuh-LAY-uhs

The omens in dreams guide this reading,
leading toward its concluding prophecy.

Galilee = GAL-ih-lee

Nazorean = naz-uh-REE-uhn

TO KEEP IN MIND

Read the Scripture passage and its commentary in Workbook. Then read it from your Bible, including what comes before and after it, so that you understand the context.

He **rose**, took the **child** and his **mother**,
and **went** to the land of **Israel**.

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**.

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.

Matthew does not provide many details regarding the journey to Egypt or the journey to return home. However, he is very clear that Joseph chooses to settle in the little town of Nazareth in order to avoid the danger waged by the new rule in Judea. In the village of Nazareth, located roughly 90 miles north of Jerusalem, Jesus will be able to grow in a quiet fashion until he is ready to begin his ministry.

Read in the context of the liturgical celebration of the Holy Family, we are invited to contemplate the righteousness of Joseph. He puts the care of his family above

his own well-being, as he trusts God's intervention through the message of an angel. He is a beloved foster father who listens carefully to the will of God, forsaking his homeland and his work. We pray that our Christian families, bombarded by many voices in this world, may diligently discern the will of God for the good of their households. S.W.