

## FIRST READING – A HOLY FAMILY

A reading from the book of Sirach.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

The Lord honours a father above his children,  
and he confirms a mother's right over her sons.  
Whoever honours their father atones for sins,  
and gains preservation from them;  
when they pray, they will be heard.  
Whoever respects their mother  
is like one who lays up treasure.  
The person who honours their father  
will have joy in their own children,  
and when they pray they will be heard.  
Whoever respects their father will have a long life,  
and whoever honours their mother obeys the Lord.  
My child, help your father in his old age,  
and do not grieve him as long as he lives.  
Even if his mind fails, be patient with him;  
because you have all your faculties  
do not despise him all the days of his life.  
For kindness to your father will not be forgotten,  
and will be credited to you against your sins –  
a house raised in justice for you.

PAUSE for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – A HOLY FAMILY

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,  
clothe yourselves with compassion,  
kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Bear with one another and,  
if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other;  
just as the Lord has forgiven you,  
so you also must forgive.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love,  
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,  
to which indeed you were called in the one body.

And be thankful.

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

And whatever you do, in word or deed,  
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

Children, obey your parents in everything,  
for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Fathers, do not provoke your children,  
or they may lose heart.



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING – A HOLY FAMILY

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

*Glory to you, O Lord.*

After the wise men had left,  
an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,  
“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt,  
and remain there until I tell you;  
for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”  
Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night,  
and went to Egypt,  
and remained there until the death of Herod.  
This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord  
through the prophet,  
“Out of Egypt I have called my son.”  
When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared  
in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,  
“Get up, take the child and his mother,  
and go to the land of Israel,  
for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”  
Then Joseph got up, 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 there.  
And after being warned in a dream,  
he went away to the district of Galilee.  
There he made his home in a town called Nazareth,  
so that what had been spoken through the prophets  
might be fulfilled,  
“He will be called a Nazorean.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

Reading I: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

The Sirach passage is obviously a commentary on the fifth (fourth) commandment: Honor your father and your mother. It adds the point that obedience to this commandment atones for sins (Sir 3:3, 14), an idea typical of later Judaism.

This latter point should not be taken with full theological seriousness. The central message of the New Testament is, of course, that atonement for sins is through Christ alone.

The point should be taken merely as an incentive or inducement to obey this commandment, for in a loose, non-theological sense it may well be said that love of one's parents makes up for many sins.

Responsorial Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

This wisdom psalm, with its introductory beatitude ("Blessed is every one who fears the Lord") presents the fear of the Lord as the basis of family, social, and economic prosperity.

On a superficial level, it seems to express a naive, Deuteronomic confidence that obedience to the law will be an insurance against disaster, and a conviction that disaster can always be explained as punishment for disobedience, views seriously questioned already in the Book of Job.

Yet, there is something to it.

Where there is a wholesome respect for God and his will, human relationships do stand a better chance of being well ordered and harmonious. Those who fear the Lord are not tempted to put themselves in the place of God, to boast in their personal achievements.

Such persons are therefore freed to love their neighbor and make it easier for the neighbor to love in return.

Reading II: Colossians 3:12-21 (long form); 3:12-17 (short form)

This is part of the "parenthesis," or ethical section, of the letter to the Colossians. Such exhortations follow a regular pattern that is widely believed to reproduce the structure of a primitive Christian catechism.

The passage begins with a list of virtues, introduced by the imperative "clothe yourselves." This language reflects the vesting of the candidate as he or she came up out of the baptismal font. This imperative may be preceded by another, namely, "get rid of" followed by a list of vices. This recalls the stripping of the candidate prior to baptism.

Following these general exhortations, there is often, especially in the later New Testament letters, a “Haustafel,” or household code, listing the various members of family and society and their respective duties.

Such codes were apparently derived from Stoic teaching via Hellenistic Judaism, whence they passed into Greek-speaking Christianity. That is why they reflect the subordinationist ethic of the surrounding society (“Wives, be subject”—has less appeal or relevance in our day).

But this subjectionist element, derived as it is from Stoicism, is not the distinctively Christian element in the code. That is found in the words “in the Lord”; in the injunction to husbands to love their wives; in the earlier definition of love as forgiveness; and in specifying the motivation for forgiveness as Christ’s forgiveness of sinners.

Here we should be able to find the raw materials for the formulation of a Christian ethic for a society that is not organized on a hierarchical, subordinationist pattern.

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

Only by a questionable extrapolation from the text, involving an illegitimate historicization, would it be possible to relate this gospel to the theme of the Holy Family. Matthew’s concern is rather to present Jesus as recapitulating in his life the history of Israel.

The quotation from Hosea, “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” originally applied to the calling of Israel in the Exodus.

For Matthew, Jesus is the second Moses and the true Israel—ideas that he expresses by means of a midrashic narrative based on the text from Hosea.

Matthew next has to bring Jesus from Bethlehem to Nazareth. This is achieved differently by Luke, who represents the Holy Family as permanently domiciled in Nazareth and as only visitors to Bethlehem for the census. Matthew does it by means of an otherwise unknown text, said to be from Scripture.

It is commonly thought that whatever its immediate origin (some lost apocryphal work?), it is ultimately based on Isaiah 11:1, where the Davidic Messiah is described as “a shoot [Hebrew: naser, suggesting “Nazarene” and “Nazareth”] from the stump of Jesse.”

Once again Matthew sees the movements of the Holy Family as the fulfillment of Scripture.

Reginald H. Fuller