

DECEMBER 31st, 2017: HOLY FAMILY
Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14 Colossians 3:12-21 Luke 2:22-40

One of the most difficult things for some Catholics to admit is that no Christian biblical author seems to argue that the “contemplative life” is the ideal way to live one’s faith. That doesn’t prove such a life style isn’t valid – electric lights aren’t in the Bible either – but it often overlooks what our sacred writers actually contend is essential to the way we’re to live out our faith. Perhaps that’s why we should carefully listen to today’s three Holy Family readings.

In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures true faith revolves around how we relate with others. Though we’re to have a correct relationship with God (or the risen Jesus), the first step in forming that relationship is to connect correctly with the people around us – especially those closest to us: our family.

Like you, I grew up with ridiculous holy card pictures of the Holy Family, usually depicting Joseph sawing a piece of wood, Mary spinning wool, and the boy Jesus playing on the floor with miniature crosses. (I presume the parents of any child engaging in similar behavior today would immediately make an appointment with the nearest child psychologist!) The image is as far from real life as it would’ve been had the artist included zombies in the room.

If, as Luke states in today’s gospel pericope, the newly born Jesus eventually “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him,” his maturing must have paralleled our maturing. During that formative period, some “things” work; some don’t. There’s probably as much hit and miss in the holy trio’s relationship as there are in our relationships. This is especially true if you remember what I said about the historicity of angelic annunciations on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Everything Joseph and Mary (and perhaps even Jesus) later learned about their special bond wasn’t known by them at the beginning of that relationship.

We’re especially grateful for the nitty-grittiness of today’s first and second readings. Sirach, for instance, probably speaks from personal experience when he counsels his readers, “Even if (your father’s) mind fails, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life.” Nothing is more frustrating than trying to communicate with a loved one experiencing dementia. Were it an option, I imagine some caretakers would gladly volunteer to spend a few months in a cloistered convent or monastery. Yet our sacred author leaves no wiggle room. How we go one on one with others is an essential part of our faith.

After 2,000 years of “hit and miss” I presume most married couples – especially the wives – would challenge the advice of the writer of Colossians, “Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord.” The Pauline disciple responsible for this letter is certainly coming from a different environment than the one modern Christians normally encounter. After reflecting on human relations over the centuries, most followers of Jesus would honestly testify that basing a husband/wife relationship on subordination isn’t the best way to imitate the risen Jesus. Some things work; some don’t.

But it’s important in all relationships to have hope.

Scholars presume Simeon and Anna were constant fixtures in the Jerusalem temple. They probably asked for parental permission to hold each child that came in for the purification rituals. Both spoke about what this child could one day become. They believed every newborn had the possibility of developing into someone who’ll give “glory” to Israel.

Of course, that will only happen if the child’s parents are willing to endure the pain – the sword – which comes from forming deep relationships with one another and their child. No matter how high our hopes, eventually every family must “return to Galilee.”

JANUARY 7TH, 2018: EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

“We Three Kings” certainly isn’t an appropriate hymn for the feast of the Epiphany. If Scripture scholars had their way every “kingly” crib statue would be ceremoniously smashed during today’s liturgy – immediately before the homily.

Why do we encourage such a violent ritual? Because the idea of royalty visiting Joseph and Mary’s Bethlehem home completely turns the evangelist’s message upside down.

Matthew’s well-known narrative commemorates a visit not of kings, but of despised people. The confusion happened when the original Greek text was transliterated into Latin; the word *magoi* became *magi*. The Greek *magoi* refers to sorcerers or magicians; the Latin *magi* signifies kings or high potentates.

Counter to us Latin-rite folk, Greek speaking Christians always kept the gospel’s original meaning. For instance, the famous mid-6th century Byzantine mosaic of the three Bethlehem visitors in the basilica of St. Apollinaris in Ravenna depicts the trio wearing magician outfits not royal robes.

Once we transform sorcerers into kings, Matthew’s theology goes down the biblical tube. The evangelist includes this narrative in his Jewish/Christian gospel to point out that the most unlikely people, using the most unlikely means, can often surface Jesus in their lives more quickly than likely people following likely means.

According to Exodus 22:17, sorcerers are to be killed on sight. Among other abominations, they follow stars and heavenly bodies to surface God’s will in their lives. Nothing could be further from biblical faith. (Though few have noticed, the 1940 Academy Award winning song - and Disney mainstay - *When You Wish Upon a Star* is roundly condemned in the Hebrew Scriptures.) Yet these pagan magicians eventually find Jesus while Herod, the Jew, refuses to even go down to Bethlehem. God obviously works in strange ways.

Though Third-Isaiah reflects, in our first reading, on non-Jews one day becoming Jews, he never goes as far as Paul’s conviction that Gentiles as Gentiles can become Christians. That unexpected discovery certainly makes the faith of Jesus an exciting experience for the Apostle. As he tells the Ephesians, “. . . Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” In other words, “No one can predict how God’s going to work in our lives.”

That conviction was one of the original insights fueling the restoration of the catechumenate. Most of us remember the old days when possible new members simply went to a series of “convert classes.” After a couple months of having the priest fill their minds with Catholic teachings, the students took a simple true/false exam, easily passed, and were welcomed into the church either by baptism or profession of faith.

The restored catechumenate, on the other hand, begins not with the candidates receiving gobs of new information, but by encouraging them to reflect on what has already happened in their lives to bring them to this point. The presupposition is that God’s been working with and in them long before they and their sponsor walk into the parish hall. Following Matthew’s *magoi* theology, no two discovery stories are the same.

I once read an article explaining why John Henry Newman’s canonization was taking such a long time. One of the reasons for the delay came from the Vatican commission’s refusal to include anything in the process that had happened to Newman before his admission into the Catholic Church. Obviously the powers that be were convinced God began working in the life of the author of “Lead, Kindly Light” only 12 years after he penned those famous lyrics, in 1845 when he became a Catholic.

Perhaps we should create a Scripture service to be used immediately before the first catechumenate or canonization session begins, consisting just of today’s gospel reading.

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