

DECEMBER 27th, 2020: 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.”

Friday, JANUARY 1ST, 2021: SOLEMNITY OF MARY
Numbers 6:22-27 Galatians 4:4-7 Luke 2:16-21

We actually know very little about the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. Except for Luke, the evangelists didn't write much about her, and the earliest Christian author, Paul, only refers to her in passing, as he does in today's Galatians passage: ". . . God sent his Son, born of a *woman* . . ." Though many of us Catholics don't like to admit it, the first gospel writer, Mark, tells us in chapter 3 that Mary was one of Jesus' family members who one day "came to seize him" because they thought he was "out of his mind." If we only had Mark's gospel, I don't think we'd have many churches named "St. Mary's."

In some sense, it isn't important to know what the evangelists tell us about her historically as it is to surface how they use her – how they have her react to her son and his message. No one uses her better than Luke. Throughout his gospel, she's Jesus' perfect disciple. And Luke has a simple definition of that special person: he or she is someone who first listens to God's word and then carries it out.

Most of us are familiar with John Williams' well-known score for the movie *Jaws*, especially the two-note *ostinato* which warns of the shark's appearance. When we hear it, we know something bad's about to happen. In a parallel, but totally different way, whenever Mary appears in Luke's gospel, he plays her theme song, almost always mentioning something about hearing God's word and/or carrying it out. The classic place is in 11:27-28. "While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.' He replied, 'Rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.'" If Mary's a significant figure for Luke, it's not because she's Jesus' mother, but because she best carries out her son's command to listen and act.

The evangelist's emphasis on Mary as Jesus' perfect follower also seems to be behind his remark in our gospel pericope that, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." Before acting, other Christs must do a lot of reflecting simply to know exactly what God wants them to do.

Yet we can never forget that the historic Mary heard and carried out God's word as a 1st century BCE Palestinian Jew, not the European, blue-eyed Gentile young woman we're familiar seeing in our modern pictures and statues of her. Paul reminds his Galatian community that Jesus was "born under the law." Luke likewise reminds his Gentile community about one of the practical implications of keeping that law: "When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel . . ."

Mary didn't hear God's word in a church, during a celebration of the Eucharist, or while listening to one of the gospels. She heard that word in a synagogue, reciting her Sabbath meal prayers, or while listening to the Hebrew Scriptures. God's word in that Jewish context eventually led her son, herself, and people like Paul to go beyond the limits of that historical context and discover Yahweh present and working in all people, not just Jews.

Perhaps January 1st is the best day to hear the famous blessing of Aaron. Though originally a Jewish fertility blessing, its words have evolved into sentiments all people of God share. Jesus' mother must have frequently employed it. May we, like Mary, not only hear these thoughts about peace, but during this year actually commit ourselves to doing what's necessary to make that peace a reality.