

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY (A)  
Sirach 3:2-7,12-14 Psalm 128 Colossians 3: 12-21 Matthew 2: 13-15,19-23  
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Holy Family Sunday—a lovely celebration of family. But for many modern people a painful one as well. After all, so many families are fragmented these days. Recently a teenager made reference to “my real father,” and to “my stepfather who was like a father to me.” I noted the past tense in that statement and I asked him about his stepfather. “My mother just divorced him.” So, I ask myself, how do I preach about the “Holy Family” without intensifying or stirring up pain for this kid?

Maybe it’s a day to call people to tend to the families they have. Granted none of our families are perfect, or fit the stereotype of “holy,” but, as with other human relationships, would an investment of time and energy help improve things? Sirach speaks a word to the ties we have in family and our obligation to tend to them. The sage reminds children of the honor and authority parents have over their children. He says the authority of parents is a position set by God and that children are to reverence it. To urge reverence, honor and obedience to parents Sirach promises rewards---atonement for sins...riches...children and prayers heard.

While these benefits sound a bit venal, getting rewards for doing the right things, nevertheless, the prophet is stressing a point: care, love and honor towards parents is an important priority for people in their relationship with God. I have been to wake services where adult children, standing by the casket of parent laments, “I wish I had called him/her more...visited more....told them I loved them.” Sirach’s advice to children has to be heard these days when intense pressures from having young children and careers tend to push attentiveness to our parents to a back burner. Unlike many other societies in the world, ours pays less attention to the aged among us. Families in our society no longer live next door or up the street from one another, but often in other places around the country. Sirach reminds us of the importance of family ties and challenges the modern listener to be creative and willing to invest energy and resources to maintain them.

I can’t say I like the way the Sirach reading first speaks about both parents, but

then shifts to emphasis on the father. “Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children...” Sirach was addressing a patriarchal society: but know that modern ears will probably note the male emphasis, especially hard working mothers and young women in the congregation, who would also want to be “gladdened” by children who honor them.

We know that value of uniforms in our society: police, emergency workers, fire fighters, nurses, etc. wear distinctive garb so that they can be spotted and easily recognized in a crowd. We need to be able to identify those who can help us when we need it. Think about the desperate need our world has for people who stand out because they are compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving, loving and peaceable. These are the virtues that the author of Colossians says should belong to those who follow Christ. We have been baptized, clothed in the new life of Christ and, like uniformed helpers, we too must be easily spotted in our world. The reading also suggests there is other “uniforms” worn by Christ’s followers: the Word of God dwells in us and hence we are clothed with wisdom to “teach and admonish one another....”

Remember the radio and tv series “The Lone Ranger?” At the end of the show, after the Lone Ranger rescued a person in need or fought against and overcame evildoers, he would get on his white stallion Silver and ride off into the sunset. The show would end with one of the folks he helped asking, “Who was that masked man?” Someone would respond, “Why that must be the Lone Ranger!” His mask and good deeds stood out and people took notice. Colossians invites those of us marked by baptism to stand out in a crowd, not because we are powerful, rich or of high social status, but because our lives witness the very Christ we profess, “...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus....”

Two more points on the second reading. Unless you plan to preach from Colossians and address, “Wives be subordinate to your husbands...,” I would use the shorter version of the reading and eliminate the text which, unless explained, is offensive to modern ears. Back to the Lone Ranger----How can you tell if a person is an intellectual? An intellectual can hear “The William Tell Overture” without thinking of the Lone Ranger.

Today’s gospel continues Matthew’s infancy narrative. There is more to the story than is first obvious. Matthew is showing Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient Jewish

hopes and longings for a savior. Thus, the infancy stories have echoes of Moses and Israel's history—the threat of a tyrant ruler, the sojourn in Egypt, the coming out of Egypt, etc. Matthew is setting up his story to show that Jesus, like Moses, will lead us into a new covenant with God and create a new Israel, the church. The evangelist is also showing that this family is under God's protection, as was Moses and the Israelites as they escaped from slavery, for this chosen family will provide the formative environment for Jesus, God's instrument of salvation.

I am reading this scriptural passage with “the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other” (to quote Karl Barth's instruction to preachers). While God has good intentions for the holy family, worldly powers are out to destroy it. God reaches out to protect them by sending warning and guiding messages to Joseph (the ancients believed dreams were the way the divine communicated with humanity). We know where God's heart lies—on the side of the poor, innocent and oppressed. God intervenes to save this family from those who are out to destroy it. God has also seen to the care, protection and education of the child by placing him in a loving family. With these scriptural images in mind, I open the daily newspaper and read about modern families, especially children, in mortal danger.

The Los Angeles Times reports that UNICEF has directed a sharp criticism against governments of the world for making “informed, deliberate choices that actually hurt childhood.” In its annual State of the World's Children report, UNICEF accuses the governments of failing the children of the world. More than 1 billion are living, the report says, in a state of severe threat from hunger, exploitation, lack of security and disease. UNICEF also directs its criticism to so-called “developed” countries, like our own, where there has been an increase in the number of children living in low-income households. The report shows:

- 640 million of the world's 2.2 billion children lack adequate shelter
- 500 million have no adequate sanitation
- 400 million lack safe water
- 270 million receive no health care
- 140 million, mostly girls, receive no education
- 90 million are severely deprived of nutrition

Plus, tens of thousands of children are maimed or raped in war each year.

While we celebrate Holy Family Sunday we preachers would do well to avoid waxing eloquently about the “ideal,” or “exemplary” Holy Family and read

carefully the details the scriptures present. The Son of God enters our human condition and identifies with the poor, outcast and threatened. Like millions of others he and his family must flee from a despotic ruler with murderous intentions. Other innocents will be killed in the hunt for the child. Where do we find the Christ child and his parents on this feast day? Fleeing for their lives. And where do we find tens of millions of modern parents and their children as we are about to begin another year? Fleeing for their lives. See any connection?

In our churches the Nativity scenes still stand in our sanctuaries. We will pause before them, say a prayer for our own families and light a candle. Then, if we have reflected on the plight of the Holy Family, we should cast our eyes outward to those families under duress in our parishes and local communities to see what we can do to help them----tutor children? ...gather food...? protest government cutbacks to the poor...? Maybe we will look out to greater distance and even contact UNICEF to see how we can help to support peace, education and public health campaigns in third world countries. Carol Bellamy, UNICEF's executive director, said that besides debt reduction by the first world nations, choices made by governments for war over medical needs of their people (e.g. anti-AIDS drugs, medicines for malaria and diarrhea, etc.) also contributed to the distress of poor families in the world. First world profiteering through arms' sales has a trickle-down effect on the poor.

Keeping the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other reminds us that God's heart is on the side of families under stress—and that is where our hearts should also be at today's eucharist and beyond the doors of our churches.

#### ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

THE LIVING PULPIT, July-September, 1999. This whole edition was on the theme of the family and has articles, quotations, book suggestions, scriptural studies, etc. that relate to this theme. This publication is an excellent preaching resource.

For subscriptions call: 1-866-545-4311. Check their webpage for back issues: <http://www.PULPIT.ORG>

#### QUOTABLE

I AM SILENT.....AND EXPECTANT

How silently  
How silently  
The wondrous gift is given.

I would be silent now,  
Lord,  
and expectant.....  
That I may receive  
the Gift I need,  
So that I may become  
The gifts others need.  
Amen

-----Ted Loder in “Guerrillas of Grace”

## JUSTICE NOTES

At the Seder table, we remember our suffering as strangers in Egypt to help us avoid imposing it on others and to renew our capacity for empathy.... We study the Bible’s teaching about how we should relate to the stranger in our midst, the Other, whom we have the power to oppress or uplift, to shun or welcome, to insult or honor, to neglect or protect. The Bible contains so many reminders to treat the stranger fairly because the experience of suffering more often leaves a thirst for vengeance rather than compassion for others.

—David Arnow, “Tikkum,” vol. 19, no. 2 (Quoted in, “The Living Pulpit,” Volume 13, No. 4, October-December, 2004, page 48.

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Jerry Cummings #0095361 (On death row since 11/11/97)

Elrico Fowler #0134151 (11/14/97)

Erroll Moses #0552017 (11/18/97)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A."** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year A-CD" button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)
5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

### **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh.

Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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