

## Holy Family

## Year B



**FIRST READING**  
**Sirach 3:2–6, 12–14**

**PSALM**  
**Psalm 128:1–5**

**SECOND READING**  
**Colossians 3:12–21**

**GOSPEL**  
**Luke 2:22–40**

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### PRAYER

#### Psalm 128:1–5

Happy is everyone  
who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways.  
You shall eat the fruit  
of the labor of your hands;  
you shall be happy,  
and it shall go well with you.  
Your wife will be  
like a fruitful vine within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.  
Thus shall the man be blessed  
who fears the LORD.  
The LORD bless you from Zion.  
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem  
all the days of your life.

### READING THE WORD

#### First Reading

##### Sirach 3:2–6, 12–14

For the Lord honors a father  
above his children,  
and he confirms a mother's right  
over her children.  
Those who honor their father  
atone for sins,  
and those who respect their mother  
are like those who lay up treasure.  
Those who honor their father  
will have joy in their own children,  
and when they pray they will be heard.

Those who respect their father  
will have long life,  
and those who honor their mother  
obey 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.  
For kindness to a father  
will not be forgotten,  
and will be credited to you  
against your sins.

#### Second Reading

##### Colossians 3:12–21

As God's chosen ones, holy and be-  
loved, clothe yourselves with compas-  
sion, 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 every-  
thing, for this is your acceptable duty  
in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke  
your children, or they may lose heart.

#### Gospel

##### Luke 2:22–40

When the time came for their puri-  
fication according to the law of Mo-  
ses, they brought him up to Jerusa-  
lem to present him to the Lord (as  
it is written in the law of the Lord,  
"Every firstborn male shall be des-  
ignated as holy to the Lord"), and  
they offered a sacrifice according to  
what is stated in the law of the Lord,  
"a pair of turtledoves or two young  
pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem  
whose name was Simeon; this man  
was righteous and devout, looking  
forward to the consolation of Is-  
rael, and the Holy Spirit rested on  
him. It had been revealed to him by  
the Holy Spirit that he would not  
see death before he had seen the  
Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spir-

it, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

## HEARING THE WORD

### “The Harmony”

The feast of the Holy Family celebrated within the Christmas season is more than just a sentimental glance at the baby Jesus, or at Mary and Joseph in the first days of their life to-

gether. This feast teaches a profound lesson about harmony as the foundation for the family and the Christian life itself.

The Book of Sirach was written by a Jewish sage, Jesus the son of Sirach (ben Sirach) in Hebrew and later translated into Greek by his grandson. Sirach is an extensive collection of reflections, proverbs, and advices on how to live one’s life wisely. According to the author, a wise life is one lived in accordance with God’s laws and instructions, which guarantees prosperity and well-being.

The passage read during today’s feast contains instructions on family life. According to Sirach, sound family life is founded on the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, “honour your father and your mother”, to which he plainly refers in the words, “those who honor their mother obey the Lord”. Honouring the parents goes beyond simple obedience to their commands and demands. The commandment finds its fullest expression in the attitude of reverent respect. The author states that such reverence for the parents will bring a two-fold blessing. First, it will be the blessing of a happy and long life - “those who honor their father will have joy ...those who respect their father will have long life”. Second, there will also be the spiritual blessing brought through remission of sins and answer to prayers - “Those who honor their father atone for sins ...and when they pray they will be heard”, and, “kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against

your sins”. In commanding the children to “help your father in his old age... even if his mind fails, be patient with him”, the author explicitly states that reverence and respect has to be permanent and not conditioned by the parents’ age, health or mental state.

Honouring and respecting parents instils harmony in the family. This harmony rests on a certain order of authority, which must be preserved. For this reason, the author begins his exhortation by emphasizing that God established this order by placing “father above his children”, and confirming “a mother’s right over her children”. Ben Sirach insists that this order must be respected to ensure a lasting blessing for both the parents and the children. For this Jewish sage, living in harmony at home is wise living.

The passage from Colossians contains a series of exhortations regarding life in the Christian community and the Christian family. Just as in the first reading, the focus rests on harmony. The author begins by defining the believers as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”. This portrayal is drawn from Deut 7:6-8 where the people of Israel, the first community of God’s people, were described in this manner. Now, the new community of God’s people, which includes both Jews and non-Jews (the Gentiles), was formed by Christ. This new family consists of those who have been “raised with Christ” (Col 3:1) because they believe in him. Its members live a different life because they stripped off “the old self with its

practices" (Col 3:9) and thus acquired a different identity. This new identity expresses itself in and through harmonious living. In the community, this harmony results from the practice of virtues with which the members "clothe" themselves: "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience". Above all, harmony results from love - the greatest of virtues (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). This harmony is further enhanced through common worship and prayer, which binds the members to one another and to Christ. The practice of virtues and prayer life transforms individual believers into "the one body" - a living organism existing in harmony.

The second part of the reading focuses on the life in the Christian family. This passage, known as a "household code", defines the mutual duties and obligations of the members of the Christian home. We must note that this passage reflects the patriarchal culture of its time. In that world, the husband and father had absolute authority over everybody in the house and was not accountable to anyone. He had no formal obligations to others, while wives and children owed him complete obedience and reverence. The household code in Colossians is revolutionary in that it places obligations on the husbands/fathers. Thus, while the wives are to accept the authority of the husband, the husbands are to love the wives and never abuse them. Such a demand was not a part of the culture of the day and would be seen as placing significant limits on the man's unrestrained authority. Similarly, children are to obey the parents, but the fathers must exercise

moderation when disciplining the children. This would be a shocking demand in a culture where the father had a right to kill his child when it suited him. The instructions contained here are therefore quite radical for their time. Their aim was to form a household where life could be lived in harmony and mutual respect between its members, regardless of their unequal social status.

The rich Gospel text narrates the early episode known as "Presentation of the Lord". The Jewish Law required women to undergo ritual purification after childbirth because of exposure to blood (cf. Lev 12:2-8). Dedication of all firstborn children to God was also required (cf. Exod 13:12-15). Jesus' parents fulfil these requirements; they are a family living in harmony with God through faithful obedience to his laws. Yet, Jesus' arrival in the Temple had significance far greater than the fulfilment of the Law. He was met by Simeon and Anna who, acting as prophets, recognized and declared who this child really was. Simon proclaimed him as God's salvation for the Gentiles and the Israelites alike. Anna spoke of him as the one who would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem. Salvation and redemption are about the restoration of peace and harmony in the human world, and, indeed, in the entire creation. Jesus came to restore that harmony which was dramatically disrupted by the events described in Genesis Ch. 3. But before embarking on his salvific and redemptive mission, Jesus would live in harmony with God at home, where his parents ensured that he "became strong, filled with wisdom".

Today's feast points to harmony as the very foundation for the Christian life, and the purpose of Jesus' coming into the world. Ben Sirach and the author of Colossians point to harmony in the family as the necessary condition for the wellbeing of all its members. Harmony in the Christian community reflects its new identity, and is achieved through the practice of virtues, love being chief of them. Indeed, the restoration of harmony in creation was the very purpose of Jesus' mission. Redemption and salvation accomplished by him mean that the entire creation can and will be restored to the state of harmony within itself and with God. That process is already on the way, and Christians are actively involved in it living according to God's ways, for, as stated by the Psalmist, "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walk in his ways".

### **LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD**

Today's feast calls our attention to the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The supreme communication of God, Jesus Christ begins his life on earth in an ordinary family setting. In our African context, the family is a basic and essential element of the larger community. We are nurtured and raised within families. The family gives us our identity. Often times we introduce ourselves by invoking the names of our fathers and ancestors for easy identification.

The three readings of this feast identify the sound foundations for our families, namely harmony and mutual respect. As we celebrate this noble feast, we are invited to reflect and evaluate

ourselves and our families in the light of this message by asking whether we really live in a manner that ensures harmony.

The first reading bears a message to the youth by evoking the fourth commandment: honour your father and mother in order to ensure harmony in the family. Nowadays, a culture of misguided independence is taking root and growing among the youth. A great number of young people are becoming rapidly disconnected from the authority of their parents claiming to be more developed and technologically advanced. Yet, their pride and rejection of parental authority and guidance often leads to crime, gambling, alcohol and drug abuse, harmful relationships, indecent dressings and any number of other harmful life choices. The community considers such behaviour disgraceful and those who engage in it become increasingly isolated. There is another category of the youth, which practices "calculated obedience" – they patiently wait for the day when the father dies to inherit the property, and then seize it solely for themselves. This leads to chaos and the destruction of the larger family. This feast calls us to inspect our hearts and be guided by the 4th commandment. Doing so we shall enjoy the blessings of joy, peaceful life, wisdom and respect. Let our parents be proud of what is said of us in the community.

The second reading calls on the parents to create an atmosphere of love and respect in which the children can grow, following their parents as positive models.

Children need to see the mother and father seated together on this feast, to witness their love and harmony. Unfortunately, that is often not the case as excessive drinking of alcohol, endless quarrels in the presence of the children, rumour mongering and marital infidelity portrays an image far removed from that of the holy family. Such behaviours inevitably alienate parents from children and often lead to a loss of moral authority. In our modern world oftentimes the family is dead; what is left is simply a house.

Even if we are not directly parents or children, we are always a part of a family, be it of a Church or community or society. Today's feast offers us a chance to open a new chapter in these, our families. Let us clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, patience, love, humility and meekness. Let each of us fulfil their duties and obligations to ensure harmony in our family, whatever it may be. While making our choices and decisions, let us be guided by the spirit that led Mary and Joseph to the temple – the concern for living in unity and harmony according to God's ways. A good way to begin or continue in this spirit is by prayer. Let our families be united in gratitude to God for the gift we are to one another. A family that prays together stays together.

### PROVERB

*"In a chaotic home, the head of the household constantly reminds his children of how he is their father."*

### ACTION

#### Self-examination:

Do I genuinely listen to my parents?

Do I make an effort to sit and dialogue with my children?

Am I a source of conflict and disharmony in my family or community?

#### Response to God:

I will make a personal commitment to call my family together for prayer every evening before retiring to bed.

#### Response to your World:

If my family/community is torn apart by conflict and disunity, I will take some steps within my power towards the restoration of harmony.

As a group, we shall organize a workshop or seminar on how to face the challenges that undermine peace and harmony in our families.

### PRAYER

*Lord Jesus Christ  
your birth brought joy to your Mother,  
Father and the world.  
We commend our families  
into your hands;  
purify us from all the behaviours  
that bring chaos in them.  
Pour forth your blessings on us all  
and keep us always  
united in prayer.  
We ask this  
through Christ our Lord  
who live and reigns with you,  
one God forever and ever.  
Amen.*