

HOLY FAMILY

YEAR A



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

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 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.

FIRST READING

Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14

PSALM

Psalm 128:1-5

SECOND READING

Colossians 3:12-21

GOSPEL

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

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

Now after they 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 fulfill 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."

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Hearing the Word

“Blessed Obedience”

The readings of Holy Family Sunday consider the theme of authority, and obedience, as the foundations for a happy and successful life.

The book of Sirach was written by a Jewish sage living in Jerusalem about 200 BC. It forms a part of the biblical wisdom tradition which is concerned with finding the right way to live. Sirach reasoned that a happy, successful and blessed life results from following God's Law, the Torah. Today's reading focuses on an important part of that Law, the commandment to honour one's father and mother.

Sirach begins the mother's authority extends over children. Here, Sirach departs from the male-centred and patriarchal model of the family, where authority belonged to the father alone, and was passed on to his sons. By emphasizing the authority of the mother and speaking generally of children, Sirach goes beyond the traditional male/female distinctions to focus on the parent/child relationship in general.

Children are to submit to the parents' authority and honour them in view of the far ranging benefits and blessings this will bring. Religiously, respect for parents makes atonement for children's sins and makes their prayers heard. Being in a good relationship with the parents leads children to a good relationship with God. Humanly, honouring one's parents ensures having offspring and a long life. Thus, honouring the parents is both an act of obedience to God's commands and a path leading to a fulfilling and blessed existence.

Sirach concludes with a call to care for the aging and frail parents. This implies that the commandment to honouring the parents is permanent and unconditional. Even if the parents can no longer care for, or exercise authority over their children, God's commandment to honour them still applies and will have lasting consequences. Sirach teaches that honouring parents and obedience to the parents is one of the God-laid paths to a blessed and successful life that wise children ought to follow.

The letter to the Colossians aims to lead an early Christian community to a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ and their life as believers. An early part of the letter describes Christ as a magnificent figure with supreme authority. Calling him “the firstborn of all creation for whom everything exists”, and “the head of the body, the Church”, the author emphasizes Christ's dominion over the entire creation (cf. Col 1:15-20).

Through the sacrifice of his cross, Christ created a new people, “God's chosen ones, holy and beloved”, which now includes the Colossians. These new people are under Christ's authority which shapes and directs their new Christian life, which the author outlines in its communitarian and domestic aspects.

The community life rests on a set of virtues and behaviour intended for maintaining harmony and peace among the members. Chief among them are patience and forgiveness, which allow tensions and conflicts to dissipate. Christians are patient and tolerant, practicing love rather than imposing their will and authority on others.

Above all, Christians submit to Christ's authority. They are urged to allow the word of Christ to dwell in them richly, and to do everything in the name of Lord Jesus. This implies a complete submission and obedience to Christ who uses his authority over the entire creation, not for exploitation, but for salvation of his faithful.

Domestic life is also considered from the point of view of authority, which at the time was held by the father who had complete control over his wife, children and slaves. While the author of the letter does not attempt to abolish this societal structure, he fundamentally alters it, placing severe restrictions and modifying the understanding of the father's authority.

First, wives are told to submit to their husbands. Significantly, unlike children and slaves discussed later in the passage, wives are not told to “obey” the husbands but to “submit to the husbands, as is fitting in the Lord”. They are to obey the Lord while making a choice to accept the husband's authority as their religious duty.

The author follows immediately with naming the religious duties of husbands, namely love for their wives. Furthermore, they are never to misuse their authority by treating their wives harshly. This calls for mutual respect and submission between spouses, as was the case in the broader context of the entire community where the members were to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (cf. Eph 5:21-28).

Wives were to accept the husband's authority as the household head, following the norms of the society of that day. Husbands were placed under the corresponding Christian obligation to love their wives and never use their domestic authority in an abusive manner.

Children were called to obey the parents, also as their Christian duty. However, the authority of the father was again placed under scrutiny as fathers were warned not to use it in a manner hurtful or damaging to the children.

These domestic instructions show the author's clear understanding that authority in the Christian household serves the sole purpose of ensuring a dignified and harmonious life for all its members. Only when used for that purpose, should such authority should be obeyed.

Jesus' infancy was overshadowed by the rule of two kings who used their authority for destructive purposes. King Herod ruthlessly sought to eliminate all his potential rivals, including infants. To protect Jesus from him, Joseph fled to Egypt where he remained until Herod's death. Returning, Joseph found Herod's son, Archelaus, ruling Judea. This new ruler was even more violent and merciless than his father. It is said that he executed three thousand of his opponents in the first six months of his rule. To protect Jesus, Joseph again had to flee, this time to Nazareth in Galilee.

The Gospel contrasts Herod's and Archelaus's actions with

those of God. First, Matthew comments that Jesus' return from Egypt fulfilled the word of Hosea, "out of Egypt I have called my son". Hosea referred to Israel as "God's son" whom God saved from the Egyptian slavery. Jesus, God's Son, returned from Egypt to become saviour for God's people. Second, as Jesus moves to Nazareth, Matthew calls Jesus a "Nazoren". This term plays on Hebrew words sounding like "Nazareth". First, the word nazir refers to a person devoted exclusively to the service of God, "a Nazirite", which was applied to a hero-saviour of Israel, Samson (cf. Judg 13:5). Second, the word neser means "branch" which appeared in the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11:1. In either case, Matthew implies that Jesus is the saviour and Messiah sent by God to deliver his people. Whereas Herod and Archelaus used their authority for self-protection and destruction, God used his authority to deliver and save. Joseph, a wise man, knew which authority to escape, and which to follow. He fled from the wicked kings rejecting their destructive authority, and chose to follow God's saving authority. By obeying it and protecting the life of God's Son, he fulfilled his task as the father and God's servant.

Today's liturgy shows how the right combination of obedience and authority leads to a blessed life. Sirach called for obedience to the parents with the aim of securing God's lasting blessing for the children. The Colossians were called to obey Christ because he

used his supreme authority to make them God's holy people. Similarly, Christian wives and children were instructed to submit themselves to the domestic authority of husbands and fathers when and if it is grounded in love and used in a constructive and never destructive manner. Joseph led and saved his family from dangers because he submitted himself to God's authority rather than serving wicked kings who ruled his homeland. The Psalmist knew well the importance of obeying the right authority when he stated, "happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways".

Listening to the Word of God

A culture of constant change and rebellion challenges traditional values and overturns the status quo. A tide appears to be sweeping across nations, leaving behind trail of devotion to one's own feelings over and against obedience to the voice of an external authority. In some places, children are setting the agenda and demanding that their parents follow. Some parents are caught in a dilemma – on one hand they feel they must have a say in the developmental processes of their children, and on the other hand they are haunted by what the new age would interpret as undue interference. In the whirlpool of such a melee, the virtue of obedience appears to be helplessly drowning. Obedience is gradually becoming an uncommon virtue in the twenty-first century. In fact, in the mindset of

some people, disobedience is the new synonym for liberty.

The readings of today exhort us to revisit and imbibe the value enshrined in the virtue of obedience. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “an act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons.”

Obedience is spirituality in action. It has a direct impact on one’s relationship with God. For Sirach, honour to parents atones for sins and brings prosperity. Indeed, the virtue of obedience gives birth to other virtues like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

People who clothe themselves with obedience are able to bear with one another and forgive. On the contrary, the absence of obedience brings chaos to a home. Where the virtue of obedience is not nursed and harnessed, wives are unwilling to subject themselves to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord, husbands fail in loving their wives and treat them harshly and children rebel against the authority of the parents. In a home where everybody wants to be listened to but nobody is willing to listen, ill-feelings spread like cankerworms and destroy the very fibre of a family.

The virtue of obedience is not limited to the biological sphere. It takes on a deeper meaning in our relationship with the Lord. When we submit ourselves to the Word of the Lord, we yield to the plan of God concerning our lives and this brings us immense peace. Like the clouds that come together to cause rain, little acts of obedience precede a downpour

of immense blessing from the Lord. Submission to the Word of God delivers us from many unseen dangers. We see this in the story of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Joseph’s act of obedience to the message of the Lord spared the entire holy family from the evil plots of Herod.

In the house of our eternal Father, we are all children. When God speaks, obedience is required. It is said, “a child who does not listen to his parents listens to the vultures”. In essence, when we choose not to take simple instructions, we end up in a putrid situation akin to a dunghill.

Proverb

“A child who does not listen to his parents listens to the vultures.”

Action

Self-examination

What is my attitude towards authority figures? Do I accord them respect or do I resist them by my words and actions?

How do I treat those under my care? Do I lord it over them or do I lovingly take care of them?

Response to God

I choose to make obedience to the Word of God my core identity as a Christian. As I meditate on Sacred Scripture daily, I will endeavour to put into practice what I read.

Response to your World

I will reflect and act in a manner that implements Paul’s teaching on the relationship between spouses and between parent and children in whatever relationships I find myself in – whether married or single, a parent or a child.

In a world where many are beginning to frown on obedience, as a group we will engage our friends in a discussion on the importance of obedience in our human society.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you gave us a perfect example of obedience when out of your own free-will, you choose to obey the Father in all things.

Instil in us a similar docility to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the will of God. Amen.