

Small things with great love

The days following Christmas invite us to ponder how the grace of the Incarnation flows into our world and touches the lives of individual families (today's feast), the family that is the church (the feast of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church), and the family of all the nations of the world (the feast of the Epiphany).¹

As we think of the Feast of the Holy Family, hearing the story of Jesus in the Temple at Christmastime reminds us that while Christmas is a time for family, it doesn't make being family any easier. Think about this story. Simeon approaches Mary and Joseph and prophecies that not only will Jesus be a contradiction to many people resulting in violent reactions to him – Mary herself will suffer a pain so intense that it will be as if a sword is piercing her heart. I can imagine the Holy Family had come to the Temple when Jesus was forty days old, with no expectation of meeting the prophet Simeon and needing to then ponder his words. Then within 18 months they are on the run, fleeing to Egypt to escape the cruel machinations of King Harrod who had all the boys two and under killed in the Bethlehem precinct.

I find this depiction of the Holy Family captures their situation with a realism and compassion. Mary and Jesus exhausted from the journey are asleep in the paws of the Sphinx. Joseph-exhausted from the journey sleeps soundly on the dessert floor and their donkey forages for some food. The painting captures the tension: The Messiah in the embrace of the symbol of one of the world's most dominant and influential countries, Egypt. And how in this foreign land Jesus will learn from Mary and St Joseph what it means to be the Holy Family and begin preparations for his vocation.

We always learn to be a holy family in a world where there are many influences and forces that want to discourage and dissuade us from seeking such a vocation. Still, this Feast reminds us that the potential of being a holy family is there for all of us. Holiness has to do with handing on the means of holiness by example and instruction, and with an ongoing dedication to loving each other unselfishly and respectfully².

St Mother Theresa expressed what it means to be a holy family when she simply stated:

“Not all of us can do great things, be we can do small things with great love”.

She then brings this directly home when she says:

“Love begins with taking care of the closet ones – the ones at home.”

¹ Wallace, J. A. (2006). [It Takes a Family ...: The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph](#). In *Lift up Your Hearts: Homilies and Reflections for the “C” Cycle* (p. 36). Paulist Press.

² Wallace, J. A. (2006). [It Takes a Family ...: The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph](#). In *Lift up Your Hearts: Homilies and Reflections for the “C” Cycle* (p. 39). Paulist Press.

So as we talk about holy families, let's consider snowflakes. The reason we make snowflake cutouts in school and feature them on Christmas cards is because a snowflake seems to be the perfect symbol of purity, symmetry, and perfection.

The latest microscopic study conducted in Beltsville, Maryland, and Boulder, Colorado, use Three-dimensional images of snowflakes, and what did it discover? Only a few specimens had pure symmetry. Most of the snowflakes are starkly imperfect crystals, many with riotous tufts of ice, patches of frozen carbuncles, or facets covered with ice zits.

The story of the most imperfect snowflakes lingers with me as I ponder this Feast of the Holy Family. The images of the Holy Family can be like our idealized image of the snowflake: pure, symmetrical, perfect, idyllic.³ We can also think that other families are that perfect snowflake family but not mine. But here is the point. None of us are perfect snowflake families. Even the family we revere today as most holy had its ups and downs. The Holy Family lived through confusing moods and strange journeys, dealt with disgruntled cousins and people who just couldn't understand.

That is why this feast is not celebrated for the idealized family: a perfect mom, an always reliable dad, and an impeccable children. No this feast is for all of us who are living with the challenges of every day family life where we are learning to do little things with great love. After-all what is family life? It is a series of little things, seemingly mundane chores, done over and over. It is keeping faithful, staying with the routine: the lunches, the drop offs, sign ups, forms, backpacks. The day-in and day-out of family life is not glamorous or exciting but it does call out from each of us a depth of faithfulness that finds its inspiration in the example of the Holy Family.

And this is where we turn to the readings from the Old Testament scripture beginning with this verse from Psalm 128:

***Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house
Your children will be like olive shoots around your table***

God desires family life to be fruitful and enriching where children are first seen in relation to a fruitful vine. What are vines used for? To produce grapes that can make wine. Wine is often associated with joy. Therefore there is the joy that comes with forming a home that celebrates the fruitfulness of family life. The second image of the olive shoots, suggests that day in day out work that is involved in rearing children. Olive trees take up to ten years before they begin to bear fruit. These shoots need to be tended with gentleness, firmness and care. Such is the call of those of you who are parents.

Here is the other thing about olive trees, they can live for hundreds of years. This then brings us to our reading from Sirach. This reading celebrates a theme dear to this Old Testament book. Later, in Sirach 7 – our reading is from chapter 3 – we read:

³ Waznak, R. P. (2004). [The Snowflake Family: The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph](#). In *Lift up Your Hearts: Homilies for the "A" Cycle* (pp. 35–36). Paulist Press.

*With all your heart honor your father,
and do not forget the birth pangs of your mother.
28 Remember that through your parents you were born;
and what can you give back to them that equals their gift to you? 4*

It is this theme of honouring parents that is front and centre to our reading. Notice that when parents are honoured there is fruitfulness that results. To respect one's mother is like one who lays up treasure. To honour father and mother is a way we can atone for sin. The person who honours his own father will have joy in his own children. Why is this? Well, it just makes sense. If you have a relationship where you honour your father, your children will see you modeling this and so in turn they can be formed to express this same kind of respect and honour for you. Notice that with all of these fruitful consequences there is an emphasis on longevity, continuity of the family tree – like the longevity of the olive tree.

Our reading from Sirach ends with a very concrete example of what doing small things with great love looks like:

*My child, help your father in his old age,
and do not grieve him as long as he lives;
13 even if his mind fails, be patient with him;
because you have all your faculties do not despise him.5*

This example emphasizes how closely aligned holiness is with acts of sacrificial love. I know there are many of you who are caring for aging parents and how tiring this can be. Especially when you have all of the responsibilities of home life, work and the myriad of demands that can cause such stress. The text honestly admits how frustrating it can be when dealing with the demands associated with parents suffering from dementia do not “despise him” the text says. Then the text concludes with words that put all of what we do in our families in a larger perspective.

*For kindness to a father will not be forgotten,
and will be credited to you against your sins;6*

Kindness to aging parents will not be forgotten.... It will be remembered in heaven. It is also a form of penance that helps to wipe out sins. In the next verse from where our reading ends are these words:

⁴ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Sir 7:27–28). (2006). Ignatius Press.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Sir 3:12–13). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#) (Sir 3:14). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away.⁷

So this week, what can you do that imitate the words of Sirach so that love which begins at home is the place where you can in turn do small things with great love.

This is what it means to be not a snowflake family but a holy family.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Sir 3:15). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.