

First Impressions 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:

Immediately after Christmas, the shopping season ends and stores have shifted attention to sales for the new year and Spring fashions. Christmas decorations have been taken out of store windows and put away for another year. But in our churches and many of our homes, Christians keep their nativity sets visible--- for us the Christmas season is not yet over. Today in church our eyes wander over to the manger, that tranquil scene that stirs so many memories and sentiments for us. It is a peaceful setting-- the child and his parents, the animals, the magi bearing gifts and maybe even an angel or two.

Today's gospel jars us from that tranquil setting. The magi, we are told in the gospel's opening line, have departed. The mood of today's account is frantic and danger lurks for the child and his parents. Matthew's gospel has strong Jewish themes. He tells his story of the holy family with the history of Israel as a backdrop. A Jewish reader, or a Jewish Christian, would quickly identify the child's plight with Israel's own painful history. Herod feels his authority is threatened by the child. Earlier the magi went to Herod seeking to know where the King of the Jews was to be born. Herod feels his grip on power threatened by the news the magi bring and he is enraged when the magi don't return to tell him where they found the babe. He has the male infants killed in an attempt to eliminate a potential rival to his power. After the magi depart, because of Herod's machinations, the family is forced into exile. They are forced to flee to Egypt, like the people of Israel, who suffered under similar vicious despots.

As Moses once led the people out of Egyptian slavery, so Jesus will come out of Egypt to save his people. Jesus is reliving the history of Israel and Matthew uses a verse from Hosea to underline this, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (11:1). Just as God had once rescued the people from the evil Egyptian pharaoh, so God is protecting the child and his parents from Herod's deadly plans.

When Matthew began his gospel we were told that the name of the child to be born to Mary was to be, "Emmanuel, a name which means, 'God is with us'" (1:23). So, how is "God with us," at this moment in the narrative? God has joined the plight of the world's refugees who have had to flee their homes because of civil conflict and the threat of violence. The vulnerable "holy family" is fleeing for its

safety. When we look for God's presence in the world, Matthew is suggesting we look toward the poor and oppressed. God is on the side of those pushed around by the powerful. This will be a consistent message in Matthew and towards the end of the gospel we will hear Jesus state quite explicitly, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me..."(25: 35).

We might tend to sentimentalize and romanticize this season and today's feast. But the gospel won't allow us that way of distancing ourselves from the reality of God's becoming flesh in our world. It is clear that from the beginning God's plan for our salvation and well being meets with opposition, starting with Jesus birth and continuing throughout his lifetime.

We have to put aside the "holy card" that depicts the simple and majestic nativity scene and replace it today with a "holy card" that shows a young couple and their infant fleeing with anxiety written all over their faces. It shouldn't take too much imagination to envision that scene since we have seen it reproduced countless times in television news reports and on the front pages of our newspapers for quite some time now as they report on Dafur, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, all over Africa and at our own borders. It seems every part of the world these days is teeming with the vulnerable and displaced. In our own country there are internal refugees displaced by hurricane Katrina who were neglected when they were hit by the forces of nature. Even now there are still scattered families unable to return to their homes and roots in Louisiana and Mississippi. The next time we see an artistic rendition of the holy family, so many other families will flood to mind. Jesus, Mary and Joseph are kin to them all.

Matthew goes on to say that even when Herod had died and Joseph and Mary thought it was safe to return to their home town, they were afraid to do so because, "Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod." Again it sounds like a modern tale, one tyrant is followed by another and that strikes fear into the hearts of the vulnerable. Notice how much fear and anxiety lie beneath the gospel story today. The couple decide they must take their child to Nazareth in Galilee. Bethlehem was home to Mary and Joseph, but they must now live as displaced persons in Galilee, a key area for the Gentiles (Mt. 4:15). They were natives of Judea. What differences did they feel living in a foreign setting? Did their accents give them away as outsiders? Were they like modern immigrants whose speech is constantly met with questions by the curious or hostile, "Where are you from?" How often would they have felt the strong tug of their native place and the desire

to go home, back to family, friends and the daily, familiar routines of their former life?

The story of this family began with an engagement and Mary's surprising pregnancy. Nothing about their marriage and the birth of their son fit the usual pattern. There were major disruptions and shifts in their plans and today's gospel reveals still one more sudden change for them, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt..." Joseph is told. While their situation is precarious, we also hear that they are being protected by God. God is in charge and God is steering their path.

Immigration is a current "hot topic" in our national political debate. But the issue isn't just a political, legal and economic one. It is also a human one and because it affects so many people in need our Church has voiced an opinion on the matter. Our bishops, basing their teaching on "The Catechism of the Catholic Church's" teaching on social justice, have stated that our current immigration system is broken and we need to fix it. They have called for a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented people in our country; a temporary worker program for migrants so that they can enter safely (many are abused and taken advantage of by their smugglers) and for safe working conditions. The Church calls for legal ways to migrate and legal status for migrants; while appreciating a nation's sovereignty and its need to protect its borders. The system is broken and we must be careful not to heap blame on those we call "illegals," who are people trying to do what our ancestors did for us—search out a place where their families can be safe and cared for.

The feast of the Holy Family is an appropriate feast to stir our thoughts on immigration. From its beginning the bible is a story of people on the move, either because God called them away from their home to a new place, or because God's people were forced to leave their native place and go to where they would be strangers in a strange land. The Holy Family were refugees and the gospels show us that Jesus to had "no place to lay his head." Cf. Below for more on immigration.

ONE GOOD RESOURCE

"What the Church Teaches: Immigration" by Bishop Thomas Wenski. (Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, IN, 2006). www.osv.com
Bishop Wenski is bishop of the Diocese of Orlando and the son of Polish immigrants. This resource is a handout I picked up at Holy Rosary parish in Miami where I recently preached. It is good summary of the bishops' statements

on immigration and can be purchased in bulk copies for availability to parishioners. I found it succinct and helpful for this reflection on the feast of the Holy Family.

QUOTABLE

It is not so much a question of a “more generous immigration policy” as it is of a more just policy and a more rational policy. We have a large “illegal workforce” because our broken immigration system does not provide for legal avenues for employers to find willing workers for jobs that need to be filled. A more just and rational immigration policy will ensure that government authorities can better identify and monitor who is coming into the country.

----Bishop Thomas Wenski

JUSTICE NOTES

“Rise, take the child and his mother; flee...”

(Matthew: 2:13-15)

The Migrant Family

“The family of Nazareth in exile, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, taking refuge in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are the model of all emigrants of every age and every country who are compelled by persecution and need to abandon their homeland, their beloved relatives, their dear friends, and move to a foreign land”
(Pope Pius XII *Exsul familia*)

“In this misfortune experienced by the Family of Nazareth, obliged to take refuge in Egypt, we can catch a glimpse of the painful condition in which all migrants live, especially, refugees, exiles, evacuees, internally displaced persons, those who are persecuted. We can take a quick look at the difficulties that every migrant family lives through, the hardships and humiliations, the deprivation and fragility of millions and millions of migrants, refugees and internally displaced people. The Family of Nazareth reflects the image of God safeguarded in the heart of every human family, even if disfigured and weakened by emigration.”

“...The UN International Convention for the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and members of their families, which was announced on July 1st, 2003, intends to defend migrant workers and the members of their families. The Church encourages the ratification of the international legal instruments that aim to defend the rights of migrants, refugees and their families...” **Pope Benedict XVI 10/18/06**

Did you know?

“Our U.S. Catholic Bishops set forth four challenges to the people of God in responding to migrants.

- Τη Χαλλ το Χονπερσιον – εξηορτινγ εαχη οφ υσ το σετ ασιδε χυλτυραλ φεαρσ ανδ χομπετιτιον φορ ρεσουρχεσ, ιν ορδερ το βεττερ ωελχομε νεωχομερσ;
- Τη Χαλλ το Χομμυνιον – ινπιτινγ υσ το τηε μινιστρψ οφ ωελχομε ασ αν εξπρεσσιον οφ Ευχηαριστι χ υνιτψ;
- Τη Χαλλ το Σολιδαριτψ – χηαλλεγγινγ υσ το μοσε βεψονδ χηαριτψ το τακινγ α στανδ φορ τρυε φυσ τιχε φορ τηοσε ωηο αρε συφφερινγ, πυλνεραβλε, ανδ ιν νεεδ; ανδ φιναλλψ,
- Τη Χαλλ το Επανελλιζατιον – ενχουραγινγ υσ το ινπιτε οτηερσ το ενχουντερ τηε περσον οφ θεουσ, εσπεχιαλλψ ιν τηε ποορ, ιν τηε στρανηερ, ανδ ιν τηε μιγραντ ανδ ρεφυγεε.□

What you can do:

1. Γο το της ΥΣ Χατηολιχ Βισηοπος ωεβσιτε το λεαρν μορε αβουτ ωηατ της βισηοπος αρε σαψινγ αβουτ ι μιγγρατιον ρεφορμ. www.φυστιχεφοριμμιγραντσ.οργ
2. Χονσιδερ βεχομινγ α μεμβερ οφ ουρ παριση Γλοβαλ Ουτρεαχη Μινιστρψ. Σαλλψ Πολανδ: 828-2607

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

Edward E. Davis #0100579 (On death row since 3/12/92)

Kenneth B. Rouse #0353186 (3/25/92)

Michael M. Reeves #0339314 (5/14/92)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"** **"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

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 webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

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 or 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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com