

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

Dear Preachers:

Chances are there won't be one adult, or listening teenager for that matter, in the congregation who won't catch the last verses of today's second reading from Colossians. "Wives, be subordinate to your husbands as is proper in the Lord." With the recent war in Afghanistan and the publicity given the condition of women in that country under the Taliban, Colossians has an eerie echo of a fundamentalist's interpretation of the Koran or the Bible. Will the modern listener hear this reading and dismiss it as another "proof" that the Bible is hopelessly outdated and irrelevant for the modern hearer? —even harmful for women? Or will a simple soul in an abusive marriage hear it as God wanted her to stay where she is and be "subordinate to your husband?" The preacher needs to address these lines in some way; or eliminate them from the reading since they stir up a discussion the preacher may not be prepared to address today. Another solution would be a brief essay in the parish bulletin addressing these difficult lines. The preacher might then refer the congregation to the bulletin. I bet if you decide on this essay-approach you will get plenty of readers. Perhaps the following will start your own preaching reflection or will help with your bulletin commentary. So, let's look for a moment at the Colossians reading.

The Colossians selection seems to be chosen because of its exhortation to virtuous living in the community. Certainly these words also apply to any family setting. Apparently the Colossians were having doctrinal conflicts. The specifics of the controversy may not be of concern for today's feast. But Paul's call to "put on" the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, forgiveness—and "over all put on love," speak to life in any Christian community, whether it be a local church or the family.

The preacher will be tempted to be a cheer leader for families, encouraging them to put on these virtues for successful family living. But we must first note the baptismal tone of this passage—"put on love." That's the source of these virtues! The imagery reminds us of the baptismal robe we received at baptism, which symbolizes the new life we have received by our "putting on Christ." We cannot produce these much needed virtues on our own. The source of our conversion to a

more virtuous life is the new life we have from the font of living water that is Christ living and working within us. The virtues enumerated by Paul are Christ's virtues and they live in us because he lives in us. What family member here today can not immediately call to mind the particular virtue we know we need at this stage of family life? Some virtue(s) is being tested in our family life this day....is it forgiveness? generosity? compassion? patience? kindness? I am sure each congregant could instantly name a virtue he/she needs right now!

We are reminded today that we are not on our own, but have the very source of the virtuous life living within us. It is at this celebration that we get back in touch with that source by following Paul's advice, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Each liturgical celebration gives us a chance to receive again a life giving and renewing word from our God, a word that is the very presence of the risen Christ. With him we are spurred on to the virtuous life and can sing hymns with "gratitude in your hearts."

We turn for a moment to the uncomfortable line, "Wives be subordinate to your wives as is proper in the Lord." Paul seems to have a specific concern for the situation of the Colossians community. Remember what he said in Galatians, "There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free person, male or female." (3: 28) But the society in which this early church lived did hold to certain household codes with women traditionally placed in a subordinate role. This society was already suspicious of these Christians and their beliefs. It is possible this admonition to the Christian Colossians was an attempt to reduce the animosity felt by their non-Christian neighbors. Their faith already made them suspicious, why add to the unrest by threatening the household customs as well? With an expectation in the early church of the imminent return of Christ, Paul may just be trying to make it a bit easier for the Christians in Colossae. Why rock the boat too much since Christ is due back at any minute?

During the Christmas season we do disservice to the gospel message if we rely on the warm fuzzies emphasized by popular song, television shows, store windows and beer commercials. Staying close to the gospel passage will reveal another message, one that looks at the hard realities of our day and shines the light of God's truth on them. Today's passage from Matthew is a good example of a look at the season from another perspective. Matthew's infancy narrative has a hint of tragedy about it. This would be even clearer if the story of the massacre of the

infant boys (vs. 16-18) were not omitted from the middle of today's selection. That's unfortunate since this detail clearly reveals the brutality of the despotic ruler Herod and reminds us of the conditions surrounding Jesus' birth and early years. Herod and hosts of tyrants since him, have oppressed and terrorized innocent victims and families throughout the world. Imagine the fear and sense of insecurity for this family as it hastens to leave its home and familial surroundings. Suffering enters early into Jesus's life and today's excerpt gives us a hint of what is to come later in this gospel.

Later, as he begins his ministry, the devil will tempt Jesus in the wilderness, trying to get Jesus to take the easy, miraculous way out of hardships; or to call on his Father to protect him from our human pain and anguish, "...for God will bid the angels take care of you with their hand they will support you that you may never stumble on a stone." (Mt. 4: 6). But Matthew is already reminding us that God does not skip lightly over our human struggles, nor is a casual tourist to our world taking snapshots of the natives and scenery, staying in comfortable hotels, while avoiding the discomfits of the local population.

We want to avoid romanticizing this feast or rhapsodizing about the "perfect family" as a model for our own less than perfect families. Staying with the scriptures we follow the route of a refugee family fleeing the smashing fist of a tyrant fearful of losing his power over an enslaved people. This season and this family are holy not because "Deck the Halls" sounds on the radio, but because our holy God enters fully into our lives. Where is God in this story? ----fleeing with the family into a foreign land. As we compose our intercessory prayers for this feast, we should include suffering families around the world. Check the local news for the latest examples. At this writing I would include families, especially children, in Afghanistan and Israel (both sides of the conflict); poor countries burdened by debt unable to care for their most fragile members; families on failing farms; those affected by the African AIDS crisis; the rising numbers of families returning to the unemployment roles; children in our own country who lack adequate health care and educational opportunities, etc. We pray that we don't stand by as idle or shopping- preoccupied onlookers while "holy families" are fleeing tyranny or suffering, poverty, famine, sickness and neglect in a world of massive inequalities.

Where is God in this story? God will be there for Jesus' fleeing family in every

helping hand that reaches out to help them along the way; in any hospitality they find when they arrive in their new land; among other Jews living in the diaspora of refugees who were also displaced by the ferocious Herod. And so God is with us when we find ourselves in any way, “away from home.” Haven’t we too had to wander to another place, either by choice or life’s circumstances? —the foreign land of major life transitions, such as: loss of employment, a new job, a new school, marriage, divorce, etc., all foreign soil, all moments when we feel far from home and among strangers.

What further does the feast of the Holy Family, falling as it does during the Christmas season, tell us about the Incarnation? It asks us where we expect to see God in our lives? God has truly come among us, as Paul says, “emptied self and took the form of a slave being born in the likeness of humans. (Philippians 2: 7) God has become vulnerable for us, joining us in our human condition, not in an exalted, royal state. God took our flesh and joined us in our own various exiles, suffering and death. God delivered the Son from exile and, because of Jesus, we too will be brought from exile through God’s compassion and forgiveness.

Nor did God stop being Jesus’ parent---- and so imagine how the parent God’s own heart was moved when Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus were forced to flee danger and death. While God did not rescue the Son from these hardships, it does not mean that God was unmoved by them. Today’s story gives us a clue where Matthew is going, for eventually death will catch up to Jesus and God and we will see the one proclaimed as, “my beloved Son. My favor rests on him,” (3:17) fall into the hands of his executioners, when death will win an apparent victory.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS: BIBLICAL JUSTICE HOMILIES THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, by Walter Burghardt, S.J.. (New York: Paulist Press, 1998) 277pp., \$19.95. Biblically based homilies with social justice messages by one of the U.S.’s outstanding preachers.

QUOTABLE:

The Feast of the Holy Family is a relatively recent development. In the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century, the devotion to the Holy Family spread around the world. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph came to be seen as a model for the Christian family. The actual feast

moved around for some years until settling into its present place between Christmas and the Octave of Christmas. Even though the origins of this feast stress the nuclear family, we think it might be more helpful to modern families and true to the biblical picture if you portrayed Jesus' family as an extended one. Families in first-century Palestine did not live isolated lives. They lived in villages and in close proximity, perhaps in the same dwellings, with parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws. This knowledge can be a great comfort to children who have relationship with an array of parents, step-parents, siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, and cousins.

—From, CELEBRATING THE LECTIONARY: 1995, Resource Publications, Inc., page 96.

#### JUSTICE NOTES:

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

#### THE FAMILY

Economic and social policies as well as organization of the work world should be continually evaluated in light of their impact on the strength and stability of family life. The long-range future of this nation is intimately linked with the well-being of families, for the family is the most basic form of human community. Efficiency and competition in the marketplace must be moderated by greater concern for the way work schedules and compensation support or threaten the bonds between spouses and between parents and children.

----ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, #93 (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)

#### **Promoting serious efforts toward crime prevention and poverty reduction.**

Socio-economic factors such as extreme poverty, discrimination, and racism are serious contributors to crime. Sadly, racism often shapes American attitudes and policies toward crime and criminal justice. We see it in who is jobless and who is poor, who is a victim of crime and who is in prison, who lacks adequate counsel and who is on death row. We cannot ignore the fact that one-fifth of our preschoolers are growing up in poverty and far too many go to bed hungry. Any comprehensive approach to criminal justice must address these factors, but it should also consider the positive impact of strong, intact families. Parents have a critical and irreplaceable role as primary guardians and guides of their children.

One only has to observe how gangs often provide young people with a sense of belonging and hope when grinding poverty and family disintegration have been their only experience. And while it is true that many poor children who are products of dysfunctional families never commit crimes, poverty and family disintegration are significant risk factors for criminal activity. Finally, quality education must be available for all children to prepare them for gainful employment, further education, and responsible citizenship. The failure of our education system in many communities contributes to crime. Fighting poverty, educating children, and supporting families are essential anti-crime strategies.

### **-Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice**

**Family, Community, and Participation:** We believe the human person is social. Our dignity, rights, and responsibilities are lived out in relationship with others, and primary among these is the family. The disintegration of family life and community has been a major contributor to crime. Supporting and rebuilding family ties should be central to efforts to prevent and respond to crime. Placing prisons in remote areas diminishes contacts with close relatives and undermines the family connections that could aid in restoration, especially for young offenders.

Likewise, maintaining community and family connections can help offenders understand the harm they've done and prepare them for reintegration into society. Isolation may be necessary in some rare cases; but while cutting off family contact can make incarceration easier for those in charge, it can make reintegration harder for those in custody.

The principle of participation is especially important for victims of crime. Sometimes victims are "used" by the criminal justice system or political interests. As the prosecution builds a case, the victim's hurt and loss can be seen as a tool to obtain convictions and tough sentences. But the victim's need to be heard and to be healed are not really addressed.

-----Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States

### **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

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