

*Readings*

Sir 3:2-6, 12-14 *or* Gn 15:1-6; 21:1-3

Ps 128:1-2, 3, 4-5 *or* Ps 105:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9

Col 3:12-21 *or* Col 3:12-17 *or* Heb 11:8, 11-12, 17-19

Lk 2:22-40

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Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Family. The Holy Family, as the name suggests, is presented as the ideal to which we strive in our own pilgrimage of life towards greater holiness, which simply means walking more faithfully in God's path of peace and love. Pope Francis begins his document on the Call to Holiness saying that we are made by God to "be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence." We look to the Holy Family to see the way to becoming saints.

Real families are made, they are not just biological. They are made in the crucible of life where decisions become hard, and self-sacrifice requires of us something we would only do out of love. The first reading today talks of the love towards the parents. The Pope emphasizes much the role of parents and grandparents in the building of family. Youth may run along the road, he says, but the elders know the way. In today's utility and throw-away culture, he says, this is a counter sign. And as Simeon indicates countersigns are often the sign of God's presence amongst us, and thus a place of holiness. It is a call to respect, to making the elder member of the family not a sign of nuisance but a focal point of self-giving and sacrifice. For those who have had the special experience of sitting by a dying parent, we know that the small sacrifice of time, energy, and patience it requires is little when measured by the showering of grace and peace that unites us in those final moments. It is that grace and peace that makes us a holy family.

St. Paul in the second reading reminds us that the “family” in Christian teaching is not just our own small group under one roof, that we naturally are called to support and love. Rather, it is the human family where we are to build a place where the walls of division fall and we are united, together in building a world of greater justice and peace. St. Paul challenges us towards this saying: “Let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body.” This is peace as a task and not as a “leave me alone, leave me in peace” cry of frustration in our lives. Paul points out here, and many times in his letters which comprise so much of sacred Scripture, that peace is built, where we actively look to bringing down the walls of division and extend the hand of solidarity to raise up those that are on the margins of society. This is so needed in our present world, and it is possible where we allow Christ’s peace to “control our hearts,” rather than hand our hearts over to our fears and indifferences.

In the gospel we hear the story of Jesus being presented in the temple. It is a place where joy and sadness are both manifested. Where hope shows us the way to sustain both the joy and sadness that life might bring upon us. Joy is expressed in the words of Simeon and Anna. They see what they have waited their long lives to see. They see the fulfillment of the plan of love that God forged for us, his people; what we call salvation history. Simeon cries out: “My eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,” and Anna praises God in thanksgiving for seeing the “redemption of Jerusalem.” Yet there is also a note of sadness in the words exchanged in this holy rite of faith, as Simeon foretells to Mary “and you yourself a sword will pierce.” Of course, this points ahead to Mary at the foot of the cross. She is there as the Mother of Sorrows, but even more so as the faithful missionary-disciple of her son, a role she began to assume when the angel Gabriel departed from her side and she walked in service to her

cousin Elizabeth, and which reaches its appointed climax as her son on the cross brings down the walls of division, and the human family is called to a unity of heart in a diversity of times and cultures.

Of course, we only need to look at the news to know that this unity of heart is still an ideal that we are far from achieving. A human family is built, and we all need to add a few bricks to get it to where it should be. This past December 10<sup>th</sup> we marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which Pope John Paul II called “*one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time.*” We in this country perhaps don’t think about it very much, since we live in a land where we don’t usually feel our human rights are under threat. But they are trampled on in many places where the human family, so, so many, live their lives. Thus, part of our challenge in building a place where we are not indifferent to the cries of suffering in the world is to have the “peace of Christ control our hearts” so that building the Holy Family becomes our mission. Building it under the one roof where we live, and building it under the one dome of stars where we also live.

Simeon says that Jesus will be a sign of contradiction in our world. So, too, are his followers a sign of contradiction, because like Jesus we hear the cry of the poor, the migrant, the outcast and the marginalized. We hear the cry of the smallest and most defenseless, and we know that holiness lies in that cry and in our hearts where we respond because Christ controls our hearts. This is the place where holiness dwells and where we become surrounded by love’s divine embrace from the cross. And it is there that we are reminded: as Christ, so we.