

## THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH – A

The Church keeps this feast within the octave of Christmas to give us an opportunity to think about the child Jesus as he grew and experienced the love of his family which was to be an important part of his teaching as a man. In the gospel reading we have Matthew's concluding account of the visit of the wise men. Joseph provides protection for his family from the murderous king Herod by escaping to Egypt only returning on Herod's death and then moving north to live in Galilee. Matthew tells this story as under God's guidance thus fulfilling the words of the prophets. The first reading is from one of the wisdom books in which children should show love and respect for their parents supporting them in their old age. In the second reading we are given Paul's advice to the Colossians about family life lived in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Ecclesiasticus, one of the Wisdom books found in the Bible. Written originally in Hebrew and then translated into Greek, it is the Greek text which is recognised by the Church as part of the Canon of Scripture. The subscription at the end of the book reads, "Wisdom of Jesus, son of (Ben) Sira" 51.30. At the beginning of the book is a foreword written by the translator, the grandson of Ben Sira, who translated the book into Greek when he went to settle in Egypt c.132 BC. At the time of writing Palestine was under the dominion of the Seleucids, Greek kings, who imposed a Greek way of life, Hellenisation, on the people. It was against these dangerous innovations that Ben Sira wrote to defend the traditions of Israel. He was a scribe who sought both wisdom and respect for the Law. He had a high regard for the Temple, its liturgy and the priestly office. His thought was nourished by reading the sacred books of Israel, especially the Prophets and Wisdom literature. The form of the book resembles previous wisdom books, lacking any apparent order, but it is traditional in that Wisdom which comes from God is rooted in the fear of the Lord, bringing happiness in its wake. The book's original contribution is in identifying Wisdom with the Law of Moses. Ben Sira meditates on the history of salvation reviewing the great personalities throughout the OT. All the kings of Judah and Israel are variously condemned except David, Hezekiah and Josiah, even Solomon receives a severe verdict, yet, Ben Sira is proud of his people's past, the great figures of history and the wonders God worked through them. He gives prominence to the doctrine of the covenant, the promises God made to his people but does not look forward to the coming of a messiah to deliver his people this will come from fidelity to the Law. In the meantime he accepts his people's situation under Greek domination with humility and peace.

The reading, 3.3-7,14-17, is taken from a section which speaks of the wisdom in showing honour towards parents for in doing so our sins are forgiven, we amass a spiritual fortune by showing obedience to God and the Lord will listen to our prayers. Kindness shown to parents in their old age will be remembered and serve as a reparation for our sins.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 127.1-5, is one of the Songs of Ascent sung by pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem. It has been chosen because it celebrates domestic happiness granted by God to the upright. A psalm on which we can meditate, it ends with a prayer for peace so important for family life.

The **Second Reading** is from St Paul's letter to the Colossians. In this letter Paul is trying to deal with Jewish speculation which the churches at Colossae had taken up. They thought the celestial or cosmic powers were responsible for the regular movement of the cosmos and they attached an importance to these powers that threatened the supremacy of Christ. Paul writes to show that these powers have a subordinate place in the scheme of salvation and that Christ, raised up to heaven, governs the whole cosmos which is influenced by the saving act of the one, only Lord of all creation.

The reading, 3.12-21, comes from that part of the letter where Paul is encouraging the Colossians with regard to their Christian life-style and towards the end of the reading he speaks more particularly about family life but the whole can have this application. All the expected Christian virtues are mentioned, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and gathering all these together, love, which will result in peace in our hearts. Christian living also includes living the Christian message in all its fullness with joy and gratitude. The reading concludes with Paul's advice to husbands, wives and children.