

December 29, 2013 – Feast of the Holy Family
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Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalms 128:1-2, 3, 4-5; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. We don't have a lot of information regarding Jesus' childhood, though the gospels tell us he was born in very meager surroundings. When his parents took him to the Temple for blessing and circumcision, they could only afford the basic offering of two pigeons. When Joseph had a dream about destruction and about his child being sought after by King Herod, the family became refugees as Joseph took Mary and the child and fled to Egypt. When they returned, they settled in Nazareth near the Sea of Galilee.

What was Jesus' life like in that small town? Joseph was a carpenter so Jesus probably learned the trade. In Swahili they say: *Umleavyo, atakuavyo* – the way you raise a child is the way he/she will be. I have worked in Tanzania, East Africa where, like everywhere around the world, parents teach their children discipline, respect, good manners, and how to relate with people. They nurture their children in traditions, family history, and religious truths. Teachers and mentors assist, but those who do the primary formation are the parents.

Looking at the life of Jesus we can say that Joseph and Mary did a pretty good job! They knew that their child was special. Of course, every parent feels that his/her child is special. But, given the circumstances of Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph, in faith, realized that God had touched them in a unique way.

They may have been the Holy Family, but they were similar to our families in that they also experienced difficulties in life and endured hard times. When we reflect upon this family we see so many elements of our own in them. Mary became pregnant before marriage and in such a strange way that she could probably not explain it well to others. Joseph, by Jewish tradition, had the right to leave her and even launch accusations against Mary that would result in her being stoned to death. It is clear that Joseph loved Mary very much and so he married her. When the child was born the family had to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's soldiers. How many times they must have wondered: What is going on?

In our second reading today St. Paul writes: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

St. Paul was writing to the Christians in Colossae, but by the fact that his writings have endured until today, he is writing also to us! You have to wonder if Paul ever sat down and reflected upon the Holy Family because he describes so well what life in their family must have been like. And he says our family life should reflect the same. "Umleavyo..." From a humble beginning, as a refugee, and as a carpenter's son Jesus emerged as the Savior of the world. The characteristics described by St. Paul of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love – weren't these highlighted throughout Jesus' life? I believe so. And these should be highlighted in our lives!

For Tanzanians, life presents many challenges. In this developing country so many people experience poverty and the lack of social, education and medical services. The values highlighted by St. Paul are so important. Without these it will be difficult for parents to succeed. "Umleavyo..."

So parents, be awake to the virtues required: forgiveness, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love. If we want a better world may we recognize that it begins right in our own families! The Holy Family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are no longer physically with us. But, internally they should be in our hearts for all families are called to be holy. May God grant us the graces needed so that each of our families becomes a Holy Family.