

Sunday in the Octave of Christmas
The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14
Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5
Colossians 3:12-21
Luke 2:22-40
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In James Joyce's autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, young Stephen Dedalus decides that in order to succeed as an artist, he must free himself from his family, his country, and the Church. This is ironic, as it's impossible to imagine an author more influenced than Joyce by all three. Memories of his family form a major theme in his writing. Ireland and Catholicism permeate his work.

It seems inevitable that our family, our country, and our faith will shape each of us. Our Gospel shows us the force of these influences in Jesus' life. He is still an infant being presented in the Temple, yet all three elements are already there. As a first-born male he is consecrated, by his family to the Lord. Simeon tells Mary that her child will be the downfall and rise of many in Israel, and that she herself will be pierced by a sword. Anna ties Jesus to the aspirations of his people by prophesying that he will deliver Jerusalem from bondage. The forces that will shape his life and ministry are present from the beginning.

It is the same for each of us. In fiction, or in real life, we sometimes encounter a parent who has decided to pretend that his or her child no longer exists, or of children who reject their parents. These people are kidding themselves. These relationships are too profound to be denied. For better or worse, they simply *are*.

When I lived in the U.K. I sometimes encountered Americans who were so won over by Britain that they tried to *become* British. They intentionally changed their accents and their ways of thinking, and were chagrined when someone suggested that they might be from the U.S. I lived in England long enough that I could just about imagine acting British. But the point is that I would have been *acting*. My nationality certainly influences me profoundly in many ways of which I am not even aware. To try to reject all that would only impoverish me.

We have all heard the expression, “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.” People remark that being Catholic is like being Jewish, in that if you have been raised Catholic, you are always Catholic, even if you never set foot inside a Church again. There’s no use pretending otherwise. Even when they have caused us pain, to deny family, country, and faith is ultimately self-defeating, destructive and impoverishing. The better response is to bring these aspects of our life to God, so that they are made holy. That is what the Feast of the Holy Family is about.

This is not to say that family life is guaranteed to be simple and painless. Our reading from Sirach acknowledges the difficulty of caring for a parent whose mind has failed. St. Paul urges the Colossians to bear with one another and forgive one another. Clearly, there must have been a lot to tolerate and forgive. And don’t forget that sword which will pierce Mary because of her son.

Many of us resolved that *this* Christmas would be a time of family love and joy. Yet many people who love each other have caused each other pain during these days. Joy and sadness seem to go together in our families, as in our faith. Christian joy must always be tempered by our knowledge that Christ is crucified, just as our grief is transformed by

the knowledge that he is risen.

St. Thomas Beckett, in his Christmas sermon in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, speaks about the paradox of rejoicing and being sad at the same time. "In the eyes of the world," he says, "this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the world will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason?" But isn't all family and community life a constant example of this paradox? After all, living with others is so often and simultaneously the cause of our greatest solace and comfort, and the source of our deepest pain. At Christmas the liturgy reminds us to rejoice because the Lord has taken *up* our weaknesses, yet we are sobered by the fact that he hasn't taken them away.

Because Jesus wanted the experience of being fully human, he wanted the experience of being a member of a family -- the good parts of this experience as well as the difficult parts. We have our families too. In them we experience great blessings, receive great gifts, and also know sadness. The Scriptures teach us how to make our families places where we can grow in wisdom, grace, and holiness. When we embrace them, we discover what a family can be, and that love is worth the risks.