

My Dear people of God,

Today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family. This feast comes immediately after the feast of Christmas. These two feasts are intimately connected. Christmas is a feast of the family. No wonder that many people this season, want to be with their families. The readings of this Sunday invite us to reflect on family values.

My dear brothers and sisters, so much has been said and continues to be said about family values and how they are being eroded. But what exactly are these values? The specific manifestations of family values, customs and roles played within the family may be culture-bound, but the foundation out of which they emerge and which inform them are not. The foundation of family values is virtue.

In our second reading today, we find an exhortation to virtuous living with an accompanying rationale for such manner of life. Because we Christians are God's chosen, holy and beloved, we should act accordingly. This moving characterization is followed by a demanding program of behavior. This is presented in a notion of 'putting on' or 'clothing'. The notion of clothing oneself with virtue does not suggest that such behavior is superficial or merely an outward show. It refers to the practice of wearing a uniform of some kind that readily identifies the role one plays in society. We Christians, should be recognized in the community by the manner of our living.

The virtues themselves are relational. They are directed to others, requiring unselfish sensitivity. They may demand great sacrifice. This is especially true about bearing with annoying and even repugnant behavior of others and forgiving them when they have been offensive. The motivation for such self-sacrifice is the forgiveness the Christians have received from God. The list continues with an admonition to **love**, the highest of all virtues. The peace of Christ, which is placed before us as its product, should not be confused with mere tolerance or control imposed by some outside force. It is an inner peace that comes from a right relationship with God, and therefore true harmony with others.

In the first reading (*from Sirach, one of my most favorite books in the Bible*) we are presented with instruction about family life, identifying the kind of living that will result in family harmony. Although the reading is set in ancient Israel, it is still relevant and probably much more relevant to us today! The focus is the respect and obedience children owe to parents. Parents do so much for their children. They sacrifice a lot to raise and provide for their children. We can never pay back our parents. The only thing we can do is to respect and honor them, especially in their old age.

The final verses of our first reading therefore exhort the adult son to care for his father in his declining years. The picture portrayed is vivid and moving. The weakness of the elderly father is contrasted with the strength of the son, who presumably is at the height of his own powers. This son is instructed not use his strength against his frail, elderly father's infirmity but rather for his benefit. This should be the case whether the fathers infirmity is physical or mental; ***“Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten...”***

In the gospel reading, we find presented to us, the model for virtuous family living in the Holy Family. There, we find mutuality in the relationships. We find compassion, kindness, and humility as well as gentleness and patience. In this portrait of the Holy Family, people do not claim privilege. Jesus, who was the Son of God, submitted to His human mother and father. Mary and Joseph on the hand, who exercised authority Jesus, also stood in wonder of Him.

As we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, we pray that virtues of family life may abound in our personal lives and in our families.

God bless,

Fr Simon Peter