

THE EMMAUS SERIES

The Feast of the Holy Family Year A

Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6, 12-14

Colossians 3:12-21

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

May the peace of Christ reign in your hearts

In an age when family disintegration is the cause of so many problems, today's liturgy invites us to reflect realistically upon the challenges every family faces, and to recognise that the most precious things of life have their origins in family relationships. What family is there that has not had serious problems to face, and tragedies to contend with? Growing up among us as a member of a human family, our Saviour shared in these things.

The gospels give us two accounts of the early life of Jesus. Luke's account, centred on Mary, though filled with joy, has overtones of the tragedy as well: 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too'. Today's reading comes from Matthew's account; it is told from Joseph's point of view – the breadwinner of a migrant family, twice on the move to escape a serious threat to their lives. These two 'infancy narratives' are written in a style very different from the rest of these gospels. Modern scholarship helps us to understand better the spirit in which they were composed. Mark's gospel, the first to be written, tells us nothing of the early years of Jesus' life – clearly little information was available to the first generation of Christians. But as Christian communities grounded their faith in the Saviour who came to share all things with us, it was natural that they would reflect upon the early life of Jesus. They did this by taking the details available to them – his being born in Bethlehem, the town of David; Mary's virgin birth; her marriage to Joseph; growing up in Nazareth – and seeking a deeper understanding by meditating on Old Testament themes and comparisons. This approach – called midrash - was much used by rabbinical interpreters of the Scriptures. When we compare the independent accounts of Matthew and Luke, it is remarkable how close they are in their essentials; and when we compare them with the more extravagant accounts proposed in other 'gospels' that never came to be accepted as part of the Church's Scriptures, we are struck by their reserve and seriousness. Later in his gospel - as he makes use of material that comes from the life of Jesus remembered by his first followers – Matthew, in a similar spirit, often returns to the refrain, 'Now all this was to fulfil the Scriptures'.

Telling the story from Joseph's point of view, Matthew makes it an anticipation, in miniature, of the life that is to come. The Saviour is rejected and persecuted, but God's designs move forward – quoting the prophet's words about Israel's deliverance from bondage, 'I called my Son out of Egypt', Matthew tells the story as a new Exodus. The great highpoint of Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, will return to this theme - portraying Jesus as the New Moses, going up the mountain to give God's people the New Law.

The first two readings deserve prayerful meditation. They remind us that, as we face the ups and downs that are part of every life, it is in generous family relationships that we shall find the life and strength we need.

John Thornhill sm