

**Homily for December 30, 2001
Feast of the Holy Family**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14
Colossians 3:12-21
Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23**

Our faithfulness reveals God to the world in the same way Jesus did.

Herod's plan to kill the Christ child failed, not because the child Jesus had an army better than Herod's or because he had better intelligence. Herod's plans failed because those to whom the child Jesus had been entrusted were faithful – faithful to the word of God and obeyed it.

The good news of today's reading, Matthew chapter 2, is that another image of heaven is easily available to us: a family where the word of God is at the center. Jesus, Mary and Joseph – the Holy Family – are not a model for us because they never had any problems. An unexpected pregnancy, a threat of divorce, a birth in a stable, a crazed king out to kill your child – those are problems! And that was just the beginning for them! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are models for us because they heard the word of God, believed it and lived according to it – they were faithful. And that made an unexpected pregnancy into a revelation of God's will; a threatened divorce into a renewed bond of trust; a birth in a stable into a welcome for the poor; and a death threat – well, that was still a big problem. But they faced it as they had the others. They trusted

God, they trusted each other, and they acted the best way that they knew how. And when they finally could, they went back to Nazareth, their hometown, to raise their child surrounded by family and neighbors who would love him and care for him.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, today is designated Holy Family Sunday. Family is a hard thing to talk about nowadays. For some, any description of family that isn't one man and one woman with at least two children living in one house is an attempt to undermine the traditional family. For others, any description that doesn't match their household is an insult. And then there are the sensitivities of single people, childless couples, widows and widowers, people in dysfunctional families, people who have escaped from dysfunctional families. It's easy to get defensive and judgmental, but it doesn't help the situation. The end of our second reading, Saint Paul's second letter to the Colossians, wherein he describes the subordination of wives to husbands – this reading would be a great thing to get judgmental and defensive about, but it won't help here either. But if what Saint Paul is trying to do is describe how God's chosen ones live – with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, and gratitude – these are timeless Christian values, unchanging, although not

unchallenged, through the centuries. And then Saint Paul does what a good pastor should do. He tries to help his community figure out how to live according to those values. So he tries to describe what these values might look like in a family. He probably did a pretty good job of it for the understanding of what a family was in his day.

Well, we face the same challenge as Saint Paul. We are to take these Christian values, these signs of our chosen-ness, and figure out how to live them out. But just as family life has changed since Saint Paul's day, so has the world. It is difficult when we feel threatened to choose compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace and gratitude. These may seem weak and romantic notions in the face of real danger, whether the threat is drugs or domestic violence or crime or terrorism or war. But these values have outlasted every threat that has faced Christians for the last 2000 years. They have been tried and found trustworthy. They are not passive traits thrust upon us; they are difficult choices made when violence and revenge seem like the only options. They are a secure platform from which we may have to make difficult decisions and take demanding actions, like the decisions facing Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

The stories we tell of Jesus' childhood are not just told because they entertain and edify us. They point to the mission and message of Jesus the man, the Savior, the Son of God. Jesus was raised in a family that trusted – a family that trusted God in all things, and Jesus learned to do the same. He ardently listened first

to God's word, and remained faithful to that word even to death. And because he was faithful, death was not the end of the story for him, and is not the end of the story for us. No matter what our families look like, we are all called to be faithful. And when we are faithful, we are images of heaven, not just during the Christmas season with a little manger scene under the tree, but always and for everyone. For nothing can thwart the plan of God – we believe that – our “amen” at communion is a pledge of that. We rejoice in that faith and in our struggle to be faithful, which we celebrate here and for which we invite God's strength to be our own.

Our faithfulness reveals God to the world in the same way Jesus did.