

Holy Family Sunday
December 30-31, 2017
Readings: Sirach 3: 2-6, 12-14; Col 3:12-21; Luke 2: 22-40

What a difference a minute can make. In such a brief span, Simeon and Anna managed both to amaze and confound Mary and Joseph with their words about Jesus. Simeon begins by exclaiming: “Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation...” The Gospel relates that the Holy Family with filled with amazement. No surprise there!

But Simeon follows this almost immediately by addressing these cryptic words to Mary: “...and you yourself a sword will pierce— so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” Her heart must have skipped a beat in that moment, wondering what she was witnessing. Amazement followed by a statement that would surely engender puzzlement and quite likely even fear. Why was Simeon playing with their emotions? Why would he have said this?

Both Simeon and Anna have something important to teach us by their reactions and by their words. They represent the hopes and expectations of the faithful Jewish people who were looking forward to the restoration of God’s rule in Israel. They clearly saw something in Jesus that gave them an answer to their prayers. What they saw is impossible to know or even conceive, for he certainly looked like any other baby. Yet, the birth of Jesus brings these hopes to fulfillment.

As Pope Benedict XVI taught of this passage several years ago: “In the meeting of the elderly Simeon and Mary, a young mother, the Old and New Testaments converge in a wonderful way in the thanksgiving for the gift of the Light which shone in the darkness and prevented it from prevailing: Christ the Lord, the light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”¹

And while there was great rejoicing in this scene, there was also sobering prophecy. This simple couple offered their gifts to the Lord.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, St. Peter’s Basilica homily at Solemn Vespers, 2 February 2012

They who apparently could not afford a lamb offered instead two turtledoves or two young pigeons, according to the dictates of the Law.

Anna is mentioned including a specific reference to her age, something a bit unusual. St. Luke says she was married for seven years, then widowed. She is said to be 84 years of age, certainly advanced in age in the first century society. St. Ambrose interprets it slightly differently, implying that that Anna had been a widow for eighty-four years before the presentation of our Savior. If he was correct, then Anna would have been over 100 years old.²

Regardless, both her persistent prayer and wisdom is what held center stage. She had patiently awaited redemption for all those years in the Temple, and now she knew it had come to fruition. These are senior citizen prophets, as Pope Francis spoke of Simeon and Anna in a homily in 2014, highlighting their age:

“It is a meeting between the young, who are full of joy in observing the Law of the Lord, and the elderly who are full of joy in the action of the Holy Spirit. It is *a unique encounter between observance and prophecy*, where young people are the observers and the elderly are prophets!”³

Mary undoubtedly must have known she had given birth to a remarkable child who had a mission from God, but the full realization of his divine Sonship more likely unfolded only after a progression of years, much prayer and loving conversation with the Lord. And yet, here at the beginning she hears rather cryptic words from Simeon, as well as the unusual and swift response from Anna.

The Greek word used here by Luke suggests immediate recognition, akin to an intuition. Anna ‘sees’ what others cannot, sharing this with any who would listen. It had to give Mary pause.

The Feast of the Holy Family is an easy one in which to make

² The Greek text reads *καὶ αὐτὴ χήρα ὡς ἑτῶν ὀγδοηκοντατεσσάρων*, generally translated as "she was a widow of eighty-four years." Does the 84 years refer to the period of widowhood or her age? If it is the period of her widowhood, and one assumes she married at approximately age 14, it echoes the figure of Judith (Jdt. 16:25) who also lived to be over 100 years old.

³ Pope Francis homily on 2 February 2014, St. Peter's Basilica

connections for our lives today, even while admitting we do not have perfect families. We all come from families and this is the most basic unit of both Church and society. We wonder about God's plans for our family members—parents do this especially. News flash— parents worry. That's their job!

We pray for peace and tranquility. We have our hopes and dreams, and we ponder where God may be found in the ups and downs of family life. Sometimes, people must endure tremendous hardships in their families—the extra challenges of raising children alone or of raising special needs children.

May we again and again look to the Holy Family as a model of love, fidelity and firmness of purpose. May children be able to see the love of their parents, not just when they shower them with gifts, but more importantly when they ask them questions, including ones that begin with “Why?” That is deep down a sign of love and concern.

And may all respect and honor the elderly, to whom we owe such a debt of gratitude. Simeon and Anna are magnificent examples of the respect we owe to our elders. May we never fail to show respect for their sacrifices, instead expressing our heartfelt appreciation. Allow Jesus Christ to be the source and center of the unity of your family. Lord, mold us into the likeness of the Holy Family at Nazareth according to Your will and Your grace.