

DECEMBER 26, 2010: HOLY FAMILY
Sirach 3:7, 12-14 Colossians 3:12-23 Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

During one of my scriptural methodology courses, I was assigned to critique Quentin Quesnel's groundbreaking Catholic Biblical Quarterly article Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom (vol. 30, no. 3). Among other things, Quesnel's redaction study of Matthew 19:1-12 demonstrated that the disciple's oft-quoted statement, "If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry," had been misinterpreted for almost 1700 years. Matthew's Jesus not only condemns such an attitude, his response to it zeros in on the heroic dimension of Christian married love.

After making our class presentation on the article, I and my co-critic, Fr. John Schwartz, made a confession. "By discovering what Matthew was actually trying to convey in this passage, we uncovered some selfish aspects of celibacy." Hands immediately shot into the air. Every student (almost all priests, nuns, and brothers) who read Quesnel's article had arrived at the same conclusion! Though our seminary/convent training stressed the generosity of a celibate commitment, our sacred authors consistently stress the generosity of committing to one specific individual for a lifetime. For some celibates, loving all people equally could simply be a cop-out from totally giving themselves totally to one person - come hell or high water. It's against this background of personal commitment to spouses and families that we must listen to today's three readings.

Sirach treats the uniqueness of family relationships. He expects Yahweh's followers to relate differently to their parents than they relate to others. Though we understandably can be impatient with dementia-plagued people, it should never happen with parents. The preferred reading of verses 13 & 14 is, "Even if your father's mind fails, be considerate with him; revile him not in the fullness of your strength. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten" We're expected to cut our parents much more slack than we cut anyone else.

The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Colossians reminds us what the risen Jesus expects of his/her followers. "Brothers and sisters," he writes, "put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another.

Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. . . ." Special people are expected to act in special ways.

Then the writer directs our uniqueness to those special people around us: wives, husbands, children. Though we today might nuance some of the writer's commands (e.g. "Wives be subordinate to your husbands!"), the basic concept is that our love of family must be as total as Jesus' love of us. No loopholes!

Many modern commentators - even the editors of National Geographic! - question the historicity of Herod's slaughter of the innocents. But no one questions the dedication of Joseph to his wife and son. Matthew might have created this narrative to demonstrate that Jesus, like Moses, was "called out of Egypt." Yet he presumes commitment to one's family often creates situations in which one's security is found only within that family, not outside it. How many reading this commentary have "pulled up roots" more than once for the sake of family?

We must never forget that when Paul encouraged the unmarried in I Corinthians 7 to emulate his "unmarried status," he was expecting Jesus' Parousia in the near future. He never seems to have envisioned followers of Jesus living a "non-Parousia" lifetime without making a lifetime commitment to a specific spouse and family.

Once, when I was having a major "disagreement" with a small group of parishioners, the chair of our priests' personnel board called, offering me the pastorate of another parish. Though grateful for his concern, I asked if non-celibates were offered a similar option when they experienced family problems. (I'm still in the parish.)

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JANUARY 2, 2011: EPIPHANY
Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

I frequently remind my students that if God always worked in predictable ways, we wouldn't have such a thick Bible. We'd only need a couple Xeroxed, laminated pages outlining God's behavior patterns. When we want to know what God is going to do next, or what God expects of us in the future, we just glance at the proper section of the sheets and we'll operate with complete certitude.

Our sacred authors laugh at such a scenario. The community problems impelling them to write often reveal a God working "against type," involved in people and situations in which no one expected God to be involved. God's outside the lines personality certainly plays an essential part in today's three readings.

We must remember that Jerusalem is nothing but a pile of ruins during Third-Isaiah's ministry. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had wiped the city and its temple off the face of the earth in 586 BCE. Even after their exile ended in 530, the majority of Jewish captives refused to return to the Promised Land and rebuild the ruins. They were far better off in a foreign county than in their native land. Few were inclined to go back and face the devastation and hard work awaiting them in Israel. Most were convinced the holy city and its holier temple would never be restored.

Third-Isaiah refuses to buy into their pessimism. This unnamed prophet is convinced that one day Yahweh will offer salvation to all people through the city which now offers nothing but sweat and hard work. Yahweh is setting forth a plan of salvation which flies in the face of common wisdom. "Nations shall walk by your (Jerusalem's) light," God promises, "and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you . . .

Our Christian biblical authors also believed non-Jews would eventually come to the true faith. But the way these Gentiles were to be converted wasn't in the play-book of Jesus' original followers. They were open to non-Jews becoming Christians, but they demanded they first convert to Judaism before they would talk to them about imitating Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul, and a small group of "radical" evangelizers quickly blew that process to smithereens. They converted Gentiles to the faith as Gentiles, refusing, among other things, to demand they adhere to the 613 Mosaic Laws.

Paul's disciple who wrote the letter to the Ephesians states their "ultra-liberal" belief in classic terms, referring to the acceptance of Gentiles as a "mystery. . . not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to (God's) holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and as partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." No faithful follower of Yahweh could ever have predicted God working in such an unpredictable way.

Writing for a Jewish/Christian community, Matthew must deal with the unexpected situation of Gentiles beginning to outnumber Jews in many Christian churches. What prompted these "outsiders" to discover the importance of someone most Jews ignored? Because of his unique audience and their problems, he's the only evangelist to mention the magi: pagan astrologer/magicians who should be stoned to death the instant they cross into Jewish territory. The irony of Matthew's narrative revolves around Gentiles who follow forbidden means (a star) to discover the "new-born king of the Jews," while Jews who employ the proper means (Scripture) aren't even interested in checking out recent events in Bethlehem, just a few miles down the road.

The evangelist is teaching his readers that there's no iron-clad, perfect way to discover Jesus. We follow a God who offers unlimited ways. Only we, not God, are guilty of limiting God's behavior.

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