

25-26 July 2020

**Feast of Sts. Ann and Joachim
Sirach 44:1, 10-15; Ephesians 3:14-19; Matthew 13:16-17**

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

We only know about Ann and Joachim from a text written in the second century, well after the New Testament canon was closed, called the Infancy Gospel of James, or the Protoevangelium of James. It's an apocryphal text, meaning that even though it may have authentic origins, it was not judged as necessary for belief. But it's still an interesting account, primarily about Mary: her parents Ann and Joachim, her birth, childhood, her engagement and marriage to Joseph, and other perspectives on the births of both Jesus and John the Baptist.

Ann and Joachim are portrayed as quite rich and generous, but with no children. This causes them great grief, and Ann in particular cries out to God to be able to have a child. An angel appears and tells them the good news that they will indeed have a child, and then they both promise to offer Mary to God to serve him for her entire life.

Once Mary turns three, Ann and Joachim present her to the Lord in the temple. All the priests bless her, and she dances for joy for all Israel. Ann and Joachim disappear from the story after that, and Mary stays in the temple until she is engaged to Joseph.

It's an interesting story, and again, because it's apocryphal, it's not necessarily accurate, but it presents Ann and Joachim as loving and faithful, who utterly depend on God even with their material blessings, and then raise Mary in purity of innocence before dedicating her to the Lord's will. It obviously echoes the story of the birth and childhood of Jesus, and other parents in the Scriptures who long for the blessing of a child.

Every family is unique, every family has its challenges and blessings, its joys and sorrows. The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were that way, as well as Mary, Ann, and Joachim. Every family is called to be a domestic church, in which love, obedience, patience, forgiveness, and other virtues are learned and practiced. We don't get to choose our families—they're given to us. And we make mistakes, we say things we regret, we avoid or ignore each other at times, we may even hold grudges.

And even though it may be difficult to relate to families like Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, or Mary, Ann, and Joachim, we can still look to them for encouragement and support, asking them to pray for us and our families.

Speaking of prayer, Saint Paul in our reading from his letter to Ephesians offers a beautiful prayer to God the Father. He prays with a certain intensity, as he says, “I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” This is a play on words, as the Greek words for “father” and “family” are very similar. But in a deeper sense, Paul is saying that God our Father is the ultimate origin of all life, human and divine.

The prayer is a long run-on sentence—it doesn’t parse into English that well—but Paul prays that the Father may strengthen us with the “riches” of his divine life, through the Holy Spirit within us, and that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. He prays that love may enable us, together with all the family of saints in heaven and here on earth, that we may all know God’s plan of salvation, to unite all peoples with him through Christ’s sacrifice of reconciliation. The sheer breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love for us revealed in Jesus on the Cross.

But wait, there's more: he prays that we may really know, truly experience and feel, the love of Christ which is beyond our understanding, so that we may be filled with the infinite fullness of God's divine life and love. In other words, that we may be in communion with him, receiving, giving, sharing all that we have and all that we are.

It's a beautiful prayer for all of us, but especially for Campbell Dillard today as she celebrates the sacraments of initiation, to become a member of God's family through the Church.

Yesterday at Mass, we blessed the re-painted statue of Saint Ann and Mary at the back of the church. Special thanks to Pat Clement for doing a beautiful job. If you notice, both on the statue and in the stained glass window in the commons, Ann has her finger extended—not pointed toward Mary in a disciplinary way, but in an instructive way. She's teaching her, the commandments, and the ways of faith.

This is the vocation, the calling, of all Christian parents, grandparents, godparents, to pass on the flame of faith to their children, to raise them in God's ways, and help teach them the virtues that they will live by for the rest of their lives.

Today we ask for the intercession of Ann and Joachim, parents of Mary and grandparents of Jesus, for God's blessing on our families near and far, on our church family, for those in need of reconciliation and healing, that we may all know, experience, and feel the sheer breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for us.