

**Sirach 3:2-6; Psalm 128; Colossians 3:12-21; Matt 2:13-15, 19-23**

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I dug around a drawer by the repository at the church of Our Lady of Lourdes yesterday afternoon looking for a very specific item which I knew I had put there some time ago. After a few minutes I was successful, and I pulled out a small medal of the Holy Family. I took it to my office to look at it in more detail. It is quite simple, with the figures representing what you would expect to see on it: Joseph, Mary and the Child Jesus. But there was more.

It appeared that Joseph was holding a Lily. A lily is a flower used in art to depict 'purity'. It is often used in association with St Joseph and with the Virgin Mary. Maybe he was holding it for himself, or on behalf of his wife, or for all three of them: a family of purity. There is a nice flow of gazes within that image of the Holy Family, from one to the other. Joseph appears to be looking down slightly, towards Mary, rather than at Jesus. Mary is clearly looking down at the child Jesus, and has her hand on his shoulder. Jesus is in turn looking up to Joseph.

Joseph is the masculine figure. It is his role to sacrifice, to work for the family, provide for his wife, especially when she is at her most vulnerable, caring for the children. As a father, as the spouse of Mary, he would fail at this if he strayed from the masculine into the bravado of what we call 'toxic' masculinity, because he would put his family at risk, indulging in violence and drink, neglecting those under his care for his own gratification. He would also fail at this if he shirked his

responsibility to offer sacrifice for them by seeking his own comfort, and turning away the necessary work and discipline.<sup>1</sup> He needs to take his family into Egypt for safety, and back home when it is safe. He is the protector and builder; as I said, a man of sacrifice.

Mary is the feminine. She is mother. Her role is to nurture, which is why she has her hand on Jesus' shoulder. To nurture is to enable to flourish. This is why she will have to take her hand from his shoulder when he is older so that he can walk his own path. She cannot be overly protective – the sin of some mothers – She has to know when her son must also strike out, and cut a figure in the world, and she has to be ready for this, even if she knows it will bring her sorrow. On the other side, she must never permit herself to be cold, even to protect herself. The hearth must always be warm - just in case - otherwise she has abandoned her muse and becomes disfigured.

The child. He looks up at Joseph, and sees that he gazes upon his mother. There he learns what family love is, how the masculine and the feminine are united, bound together. All too often in our culture the father does not understand his role, he thinks it is simply to beget children and move on when it proves too tough, to beget more children. Did you know that if a child - boy or girl - sees that the father has no faith they are many times more likely to abandon any thought of God than if it is the mother who does not practice a faith?<sup>2</sup> A child with no father figure has abandonment imprinted on their mind and soul. So, the gaze of Jesus upon Joseph in that little medal, has a particular resonance, whether it was intended or not. The mother's hand on his

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<sup>1</sup> Being effeminate, which does not mean having feminine attributes

<sup>2</sup> A Swiss study

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shoulder protects him, for now, but Jesus watches the gaze of Joseph and learns to sacrifice.

Yes, I know that God was his ultimate Father, and he knows that too, but he is under the charge of his human family. That is what his human thriving is entrusted to, including his love of God. The reading from the book of Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) is simple:

*The LORD honoured the father above the children, and he confirmed the judgement of the mother over his soes. Whoever honours his father atones for sins, and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure.*

It is interesting that the name of the author of this passage is, translated as ‘Jesus, son of Simon, son of Eleazar ben Sira’. <sup>3</sup> I am not holding that the author’s name is Jesus: has any particular importance: it was a popular name in the mid second century before the Birth of Christ when it was written. But then, again, maybe we can enjoy seeing a connection that God would enjoy us seeing.

Some people may be uncomfortable with me saying that there are roles for mothers and fathers, and for children, but it seems to be true. Maybe then we would not be so lonely, and there would be less violence against women and less contempt for men. Maybe we could learn what it is to be masculine and feminine again, and enable men and women to become Holy Families of their own. I think it is worth the attempt. I won’t be putting I the medal back in the drawer.

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<sup>3</sup> Jewish Encyclopaedia, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13785-sirach-the-wisdom-of-jesus-the-son-of> accessed 27 Dec, 2027.