

Holy Family Year B 2020

The world around us now launches into Christmas-recovery mode, concerns itself with bagging the best bargains in the Boxing Day sales, and the supermarkets clear the shelves to make way for the easter eggs and chocolate bunnies. But we find ourselves still in the midst of our celebration. For us, they are only just beginning. (Christians, after all, have the very best parties, because we have the very best reasons to celebrate!) Part of the very best reasons to celebrate is the mystery of God Incarnate. And this means the mystery of the God who takes on human life in all its fullness. And part of that means sharing in the life of a common, ordinary human family. Now, family life, as we all would know, can be pretty tricky. And the Holy Family of Nazareth was certainly not exempt from that. They faced the trickiness of a young unmarried mother, of an adoptive father, of questions about the strange parentage of the child. And certainly not exempt from all the *usual* trickiness of family life. In their little home there would have been dirty nappies to change; grazed knees to kiss; fevered brows to wipe in the middle of the night as the boy Jesus surely succumbed to all those childhood illnesses all mothers here would know about. Being part of a truly human family would have meant navigating all the troubles of puberty. I suppose we might not think of Jesus as a moody teenager. But if we are going to take the Incarnation seriously, we have to be open to that possibility. We cannot say there are certain aspects of humanity off limits. We cannot rob him of his full humanity.

Despite the trickiness that is a feature of so much family life we see Mary and Joseph trying to do their very best. And as we hear it in the gospel today, part of doing their very best meant complying with the demands of Jewish Law. From the beginning, obedience and faith were part of the family culture the Christ child was brought up in. They sought to do *'everything the law of the Lord required.'* They did not cut corners. They did not seek to fulfil only the minimum requirements, which is such a feature of modern faith. They did not leave the faith of the child to chance or for him to 'make up his own mind he's older.' Mary and Joseph saw the life of obedience and faith as important, so they made sure it happened.

As we launch into the new year, we would do well to hold before us the example of Mary and Joseph, who *did everything the law required of them*. Despite the trickiness of their unique situation and despite the trickiness of the normal human life, we see this faithful couple whole-heartedly giving themselves over the rule of God over their lives. Remember, this is a woman who has just given birth in extraordinary and difficult circumstances. And before the child is but a few days old, they are back on the road again to make solemn pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As we launch into a new year we would do well to remember the example of Mary and Joseph so we might hold to the teachings, precepts and disciplines of *our* faith not begrudgingly or half-heartedly. But fully and in humble and faithful obedience.

Isn't it so often the way, that as soon as some small – and often it is very small – inconvenience comes our way, we make compromise to our practice of the faith. How often it is that when competing claims are made on our schedules, our commitments, our finances, our loyalties that the first to be given up is the faith?! If family is coming for Sunday dinner we won't come to church. And we better not say grace because that'll embarrass them. If we wake up with a small headache we'll choose to lie in rather than come to church. An extra bill has come in we'll decrease our weekly offering. The choir isn't singing during January, so that means we can have a break as well. This is what comes by regarding the church really as nothing more than a voluntary society. If there was a report card for faithfulness on the continuing *practice* of the faith during the time of COVID, I wonder how we all would score?

I recently saw a touching little video of an American pastor speaking to his congregation about a recent visit to an underground church in China. He said he asked that little Chinese church what will happen if he got caught. They said, 'Oh, you'll be deported in 24 hours and we'll go to prison for three years.' The pastor, said, 'you're kidding. How many of you have bene imprisoned for your faith. And of a group 22, 18 raised their hands. Well, this pastor had brough with him 15 bibles. He passed them around, which meant 7 people didn't get a bible. He said, 'Let's turn to 2 Peter 1 and we'll read it together.' And one woman passed her bible to the person next to her. They started to

read that chapter but the woman had given her bible away recited the whole chapter. She had memorised it. Later, the pastor went to the woman and said, 'You had memorized that whole chapter.' 'Oh yes,' she said. 'I have memorized many chapters.' 'Where did you memorize so many chapters?' 'In prison. You have much time in prison.' 'But don't they confiscate the bibles?' 'Yes' was her answer. 'People write bible verses on scraps of paper and bring them into the prison.' 'But if the prison officials find that scrap of paper won't they confiscate that as well?' 'O yes,' she said. 'That is why we have to memorize as fast as you can. Because even if they take the paper away, they cannot take away what is hidden in your heart.'

At the end of his time with this little church. The pastor said he was going back home and that he would like to pray for this community. They said, 'Well, in your home you can gather like this whenever you want to. Can you pray that one day we will be just like your people?' But he, said, 'No. I will not do that.' 'But why,' they asked. And the pastor said. 'Well, you guys rode a train for 13 hours to get here. In my country if you have to drive for more than an hour people don't come. You sat here on a wooden floor for three days. In my country if people have to sit for more than 40 minutes they leave. In my country we have an average of 2 bibles per family. We don't read any of them. You have hardly any bible bibles and you memorise them from scraps of paper. I will not pray that you will become like us. I will pray that we will become like you.'

I take to tell this little story because so often the mark of modern faith is that of ease and convenience. Even as he offers a word of blessing, Old Simeon reminds us in the gospel today that Jesus will be a *sign that is rejected*. And, a *sword will pierce* Mary's own soul. It won't be all easy for them! What is asked of them is to persevere, to remain trusting and faithful. That is what it means to be a person of faith: we give ourselves over to the mystery of God, a mystery that is at once both assuring *and* uncertain, comforting *and* risky. My brothers and sisters, family life is tricky. Human life is tricky. But let none of that be an excuse to falter in our practice of the faith. May the Holy Family show us the way of faithful and humble obedience. Amen.