

Sermon Feast of the Holy Family Year C 2021

Today's feast of the Holy Family is one of the more recent innovations to the western church calendar. It was first put to the faithful in 1969, and was rapidly adopted by most of the western church. Previously, the first Sunday after Christmas was known simply as that: the 'Sunday after Christmas'! A kind of liturgical 'no man's land' between Christmas and Epiphany. While we might bemoan much of the liturgical reforms and revisions of the late 1960s, this is one (and there are others!) which *enhances* both our worshipping life and our spiritual life. In this instance the liturgical reformers seemed to have identified something of a gap. And it was no bad thing that that gap was acknowledged and addressed. Already in the late 1960s the writing was on the wall, of the enormous pressures placed on modern families, pressures that have only increased, so much so that it almost dangerous territory to make *any* comment on the family. And so, what we know as the 'holy family' is held up to the faithful as a model for Christian life. And this feast gives us opportunity to consider how in the small, ordinary, out of the way town of Nazareth, amongst an ordinary family, God Incarnate, lived and grew. In other words, there is no sphere of human life beyond the touch of God's life.

Because this feast gives us opportunity, two ideas are worth drawing on. The first is the idea of the domestic church, the idea that our very homes can be places of encounter with God, that our homes can be sacred places. Now, except for the story recounted for us in the gospel today, the years between our Lord's birth and his appearance on the banks of the Jordan river to be baptized by John, are unknown to us. This has led some spiritual writers to refer to these decades of silence as the 'hidden life of Nazareth', and with this the idea that God can be known, and indeed encountered *best*, in the humble, the simple and the ordinary. It is not so much the special, rarefied, much less the impressive or noticeable moments of life where the spiritual life is most authentically made. Rather, the life of faith grows by being attentive to the humble details of everyday life. If our Lord spent something like three years in public ministry, he spent something like 30 in the quiet hidden life of Nazareth.

It is well understood that our culture (more or less) now expects a complete divorce between the sacred and secular. This has resulted in a radical distinction between the domestic sphere and the ecclesial sphere. Faith and the practice of the faith has become something like a specialized project. Tolerable (just) in small, confined doses. But the idea of an *integrated* religious practice, (at least an integrated *Christian* religious practice), where *the whole of life* is shaped and determined according to our faith, sees us dismissed as radicals or eccentric. This philosophical conviction is hard to combat, even for faithful believers. But combat it we must! Even if we don't hold out for convincing the wider culture of this folly, in *our lives no such separation should exist*. Our faith, and importantly the *practice* of the faith, must take root in our homes and in our ordinary, simple lives, and not just church or on special occasions.

When faith and the practice of religion becomes specialized activity, (and by that, I mean something other than the ordinary, *daily* practice of the faith) then it is unlikely to survive intact into adulthood; unlikely to withstand the normal pressures and demands of life. But bountiful evidence shows, that when families pray together, practice the faith together, read the bible together, have discussions about matters of faith, and wrestle with them openly around the kitchen table, it is more likely to survive. Faith which passes itself on to the next generation, and which then lasts, simply needs to be an *integrated* faith. Christian faith is meant to be part of the natural landscape of family life. Its fasts and festivals, the rhythms of the church year, our sacred texts and even its sacred imagery, should all find their way into the Christian home. Indeed, even the clergy ought to be part of this landscape: familiar figures in the home. Not strange, curious creatures wheeled out for Sundays only.

The idea of the domestic church brings home an essential idea: that the home is the primary place for the imparting and nurturing of the faith. For far too long Christians in the west, and Anglicans included, have outsourced Christian instruction and Christian formation, frequently to Sunday schools or youth groups or even church schools, and all it must be said with very little success. Helpful to a degree. And useful for imparting some discrete aspects of life and faith. But these cannot substitute the essential point: the day in day out, season by season, year by year, integrating of the faith into the fabric of our being. If that sounds too hard, well maybe. That's why it has been outsourced! But what is at stake if we don't? And is anything too much or too costly for love of our Lord?

Now, the second idea this feast of the Holy Family calls to mind is that of the family of the church. For many people this is an incredibly important idea. When the church is working well, functioning as it should, it can indeed be the place that feels like home, that it is a safe place, a place of nurture and belonging. The story of the church becomes our story. We are invested in it. We care for it and care for each other. Now, we do have to be a bit careful about this assertion, however. We have to be careful to mean what we say! All too frequently churches like to present themselves as a 'family' when in fact they function more like a club... And this is exposed most in the areas of welcome and hospitality. Or who is considered 'in' or 'out', and how those who are newer are treated as compared to those who have been around a while longer. A sure test is whether the members of a congregation know each other's names. It's difficult to claim you are part of a family if you don't even know who's in it... And we can see how well the family functions in times of need or crises. Who gets cared for? Who gets forgotten? And do we actually know each other well enough to know the needs of those around us? For most congregations, including ours, work needs to be done in this area.

Like any family there are stresses and problem members, and members that are so tricky and embarrassing and such hard work we would rather not deal with them. Which means, like any family, there has to be a high degree of forgiveness and grace at work for it function well. Holding on to grudges and past griefs is not a very helpful way to live. Not for our natural families and not for the family of the church.

The gospel for this feast today presents the boy Christ in the Temple at Jerusalem. It's not the first time he has been there, and it won't be the last. Christ is pulled to Jerusalem and its Temple like a gravitational force. This is where he *belongs*. And in a very real way, this is true. *The Lord hath come unto his Temple*. In the same way the church is our home, and to extend that, our family. In the vision of the New Testament, the church does function as a new family. It establishes new familial bonds, and in some senses the family of the church supersedes, even replaces the natural family. Some of the gospel writers show how important this is, especially in the situation where a family member might be rejected for being a believer. In the gospel vision, the church was to be the place where one could find a new identity and authentic belonging. It is surely this place of homely security, the place where we are fed, nurtured, protected even, where we gain the strength to live that everyday, ordinary faith, that integrated faith, which gives a fuller witness to the truth of the gospel. Amen.