

### **Sermon Feast of the Holy Family Year B 2023**

On Christmas morning, I mentioned in my address that there are any number of attempts to detract us from the true focus of Christmas. The true focus of Christmas (the Babe of Bethlehem, of course) - in a personal and moving 'highlight' for me - was enacted during the family service on Christmas Eve. For those of you who haven't been before, the family service is a simple service of reading and carols and prayers with a simple address. It usually takes 40-45 minutes. This year, at the end of the service, I invited all those present to make 'pilgrimage', if you will. I asked everyone to get out of their seats and make their way to the crib. And some 75 people or so all gathered around the crib in a large, clumsy but joyful circle. We sang Silent Night. And as we did little Esther - Josh and Emily's girl - broke free from the circle to stand before the image of the Christ child in the manger. She was transfixed, drawn to what lay in the midst of us all. Her little brother Nicholas joined her, together peering in. The Isaiah prophecy hovered over this little scene: *The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb...and a little child shall lead them.*

Perhaps part of the wonder, part of the awe, that unconsciously drew little Esther and her brother (and should draw us all) is that the God who takes flesh, the God who becomes incarnate, the God who dwells amongst us becomes *recognisable*. And even if the 'centre of attention' is represented for us in this little stage set over here, there remains a familiarity about it all. We can see the child as one of us. The truly unique thing about Christian faith is that God is not distant, remote, or isolated from us but recognisable. God is one who shares our common human life.

Part of that sharing in an ordinary, human life is sharing in an ordinary, human family. And it is this aspect of the Incarnation we recall today in the Feast of the Holy Family. To be sure, we are *not* served in our recollection of this mystery by all the saccharine and sentimental images that so frequently depict the Holy Family. If the incarnation is real, and if it means anything, then all the usual dramas, difficulties, heartaches, uncertainties, and anxieties that accompany the birth of a child and their growth and development were the experience of the Holy Family as well.

It is a sad truth, however, that the dramas, difficulties, heartaches, uncertainties, and anxieties can become the dominant feature of so many people's lives. They are allowed to swamp us - or those of our children. They are allowed shape the direction of our lives.

Note, then, that despite the unusual and difficult circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, just a couple of weeks later, Mary and Joseph are back on the road to Jerusalem to fulfil their religious duty. In other words, *whatever was happening in their lives*, they put this against the backdrop and within the framework of something much larger. In this instance, the obligations of the law. Whatever was *happening* to Mary and Joseph - and whatever they *felt* - was secondary to them turning to God in thanksgiving, and to offering the child to God. It was surely this turning outward and upward to God that allowed Mary and Joseph to meet the challenges they faced. And it allowed them to conquer the surrounding chaos instead of being swamped by it.

It is surely a worthy model for every Christian family. In it we see that fighting against the forces which seek to undermine and compromise Christian faith is not simply a matter of individual choice. We oftentimes imagine our battle against sin to simply be a personal matter. But it is in fact a responsibility we owe to our family and all those to whom our lives are intimately bound. The efforts we make to nurture and develop our life with God is not a matter of our own individual relationship with God, but is fundamental to the stability and tranquility of our family.

Without a doubt (and parents here will know this better than anyone) there is much in the surrounding culture that seeks to unbalance family life, and to swamp it. One such force seeks to convince parents they have to have their kids in every activity possible, and to be part of every organization they can. For most parents, the inevitable result is that there is simply not enough time to develop a life with God. They try to be the perfect parent in every way but sheer exhaustion results in them not being able to spend the time they need to spend in prayer. Our prayer life should not be something we *throw* into our day. It should be *the ground* upon which we build our day. Frenetic busyness is the enemy of family life because it is the enemy of prayer.

That is just one example of how family life can be tipped off-balance and swamp us. But all around us are signs of the collapse of family life. This should concern us all because family life is - despite what progressive revisionists tell us - the very bedrock of human society. But we now live in a country in which over one-third of children are born out of wedlock. The number of children who are being formed without a father and a mother living with them is staggering. Close to 50 % of marriages end in divorce. The absence of fathers is especially crucial. 60 % of prisoners come from fatherless

homes. But the social impacts are also seen in mental health issues, and education and employment opportunities.

The nuclear family constitutes only 25% of the households in which children now live! It has meant the state has all too readily stepped in to fill the vacuum, with schools forming the values and world views of children, which in recent years has had terrifying results. The forming of children is properly done within the context of the family. Schools cannot – should not - replace families.

Now, I say none of this to cast slurs or judgment or condemnation. And, of course, there are many stories of those who rise above these trends. And very often it will be the church that helps to provide the even keel. Yet as Christians, we should be neither unsure nor afraid to affirm God's good design – his good order - for creation which includes the family. To propose a Christian model of family life is certainly not with a sense of superiority or self-righteousness. We - all of us – know our own brokenness and failures in the area of human relationships and family life. We propose the Christian model of family life *because* of our brokenness and failures. Because none of us can cast a stone. And because *it is* the best remedy to these problems. The great wisdom of the church is that *we can* hold together correction and compassion, judgement and mercy, truth and love.

As Christians, we should be neither unsure nor afraid to affirm that it is within the family that our personality and individual character ought be formed. It is there, in the domestic church, that God is acknowledged, that prayer is learned, and devotion is formed. It is there that our soul is nurtured, as well as our minds and bodies. Yes, people can make the most of imperfect situations. And yes, sensible, talented, loving people can emerge from imperfect situations. We can all testify to that! But ignore, resist, or even sabotage God's order for human relationships is a dangerous game to play. The great wisdom of the faith also teaches us that human flourishing is best facilitated when we cooperate with God's plan, and certainly not when we reject it.

Rightly, then, does the Church at this time present us with a family for our reverence and attention. For even God himself chose to come among us as a member of a human family, with all that it entails. So, in thanking God for the gift of the Christ Child, let us also thank God for the pattern of human flourishing he has implanted on human hearts. Let us celebrate this, even as we seek to protect and preserve it. Amen.