

Holy Family Year B 2017

As the dust settles from our Christmas celebrations, I hope you had a lovely time, whatever you got up to. While most people have put away their Christmas carol CDs and the shops and supermarkets now turn their attention to Australia Day, we find ourselves in the middle of Christmas Celebrations. Only now we begin to sing carols in church... But at a carols event I recently attended, the evening's compere introduced the night's event by saying '*it doesn't matter whether you go to this church or that church. It doesn't matter what you believe. Christmas is all about chilling out, and sitting back, having a good time with the kids.*'

It made me a little crabby I must say. I would like to think Christmas means at least a bit more than chilling out and having fun with the kids. It is a remarkably narrow and restrictive vision of what Christmas 'is all about'... And its remarkable how secularists seem so willing to pontificate on matters of faith: Christmas is after all a Christian celebration. Of course, this compere is not alone in stating what he thinks Christmas is 'all about'. We hear it all the time in the lead up: Christmas all about good will, all about sharing, all about family, all about having a good time, all about holidays, all about fill in the blank. Seldom, all about the love of God made known to us in his son Jesus Christ. While many of the trappings of this seasons are fine and many do point us toward what is good and helpful, it is important to distance ourselves from those statements which say, 'Christmas is all about' without reference to the Christ Child.

For us on these holy days we do celebrate the great mystery of God's love shown for us in God descending to the depths of earth, to be born as one of us, to share our common, human life. We hear and celebrate on these holy days how God draws us close to himself by first drawing close to us. We hear and celebrate of God who is Emmanuel - God with us. Not a God remote and alien and distant from us. But God who climbs into the skin of our humanity, who becomes close to us and who shares in *all* that our human lives are made of.

We keep the mood, the decorations, the festive atmosphere in place as much as we can as we did for Christmas Day. And this to remind us that what we celebrated last Monday for Christmas *is part of the same mystery* we celebrate today with the Holy Family and part of the same we mystery we celebrate next week with Epiphany and the coming of the wise men. We can't take it all in in one celebration. So, we stagger it, if you like. We stagger it, so we can better appreciate some of the depth and breadth of the amazing and wondrous thing God does in giving us his Son.

Some of that breadth and depth of the mystery of God sharing in the fullness of our human life means, of course sharing in a common, ordinary human family. So, while it would be wrong to say, 'Christmas is all about family...' we *do* find family at the heart of the mystery we celebrate these days. Not our families: they will only disappoint and frustrate us if *they* remain our focus. But a particular family. We call them the Holy Family, and that is right and proper. But we mustn't get too distracted by the sanitised sentiments of so many Christmas carols or the pretty pictures of so many Christmas cards.

Family life, as we all would know, can be pretty tricky. 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 truly human family would have meant navigating all the troubles of puberty. I guess 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.

But on top of all the messiness and complexity of ordinary family life the Holy Family was surely subjected too, there were additional layers of difficulty for them. We get hints of it in the Gospels - how the strange/unusual pregnancy of Mary might be explained. It was actually a life-threatening condition to bring shame and dishonour on a family, as the pregnancy of an unmarried woman surely implied. Bringing dishonour, or simply the whispers and innuendo of gossipy neighbours could ruin a life, indeed end a life.

Into that complexity emerges Joseph. We can see him as a truly remarkable man, a model indeed for manhood and fatherhood. He would have stood as a protective barrier for both Mary and Jesus. He would have given them safety and a level of respectability and honour. He did not allow gossip or rumour have the upper hand. And that he stuck with them reveals the remarkable love he had for both Mary and Jesus. Even though he could not explain the mystery of this child he was caring for, he treated him as his own.

Despite the trickiness that is a feature of so much family life we see Mary and Joseph trying to do their very best. 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, as told us in the gospel today, obedience and faith are part of the family package the Christ child is brought up in. They do *'everything the law of the Lord required.'* They do not cut corners. They do not seek to fulfil only the minimum requirements. They do not leave the faith of the child to accident or chance of for him to *'make up his own mind he's older.'* Mary and Joseph see the life of obedience and faith as important, so they make sure it happens.

A critical aspect of faith is realising that our lives do belong to ourselves. They are the gift of God and they belong to Him. This is symbolically enacted in the gospel today, as Mary and Joseph hand over the boy Jesus to the ancient Simeon. And in this they receive blessing and assurance but also some unnerving and unsettling prophecy. He will be a *sign that is rejected*. 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 also part of 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. Accepting the proposition of faith will mean being brought to shores unknown, unseen and unimagined, even as we have the promise of God's abiding presence. The example of Mary and Joseph, and in Jesus being handed over, we are reminded faith is not for the faint hearted. As part of God's holy family in this place, and as we step into a new year, let us be prepared to hand our lives over to God – not staying simply in the safe and familiar - and to welcome the adventure faith can bring. Amen.