

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017

Father Barry Hammett

Luke 2.39

**“When they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth.”**

I must have been about 12 years old when my family made a contribution to a statistic – the statistic that says that more family arguments happen at Christmas than at any other time. We always spent Christmas with my mother’s parents, and that particular year it was their turn to come to us. They did not drive, so my father went and collected them on Christmas Eve. My mother was becoming increasingly stressed and irritable over the preparations – not that that was unusual, I have to say – but the real catalyst for trouble was my grandmother, who for some reason had decided she was a visitor and would, unlike in other years, not lift a finger to help. By lunchtime on Christmas Day the atmosphere had become distinctly frosty, and then things were said on both sides that would have been better left unsaid, so that by that evening people were not speaking to one another. On Boxing Day my grandparents announced that they wanted to go home, and my father was happy to oblige. The Cold War carried on into the New Year, and only defrosted after I took it on myself to be a one-boy arbitration service! Thereafter everything was back to normal.

It's not that we were a difficult or dysfunctional family – quite the opposite, as we spent a lot of time together, we went on holiday together, and we generally showed the sort of qualities that St Paul wrote about in his letter to the Colossians. In fact, I think that what we experienced that year – and it was never repeated – was pretty typical of most families at some time or another. I suspect that families that never ever experience that kind of friction are probably few and far between.

Politicians and Church leaders, perhaps quite justifiably, talk a lot about “family values”, but what on earth do we really mean by that phrase? Quite apart from any other consideration, the word “family” will mean different things to different people, and we come up against the perennial

difficulty inherent in the words we use about the Faith to which we subscribe. For example, we use the word “Father” a great deal to describe God and our relationship with Him, and we often fail to notice that for many in this world – those who have been ill-treated or physically abused in childhood – the word has quite different connotations and undertones from what we intend to convey. Similarly, “family” will, for some, not have the positive reaction we hope for, and perhaps we should not be surprised if some people have no desire whatever to embrace family values, given the toxic nature of the families in which they were brought up.

What I think we mean in the context of our Faith is something akin to what St Paul wrote to the Colossians. He gave a succinct summary of how Christian people should interact with one another with love and respect, patience and humility. This is how the family of the Church should live out its life – and my word how badly we do it sometimes! It is the standard, the benchmark, to which we aspire, the model of how we, as the family of God, should be. This then reads directly across into how we should behave with and to our nearest and dearest in our families at home. Yet the high ideals of “family values” more often than not remain unattained, and in large part stay in the sphere of pious hope rather than expectation.

And what of the Holy Family, whose feast day we observe today? What may we learn from them?

The Church, through its leaders and its preachers, has throughout the Christian era created an almost indelible image of the Holy Family that persists to this day – an image of perfection for all Christian families to emulate, an image of the ultimate achievement of family values. For example, in 2011 Pope Benedict said: "The house of Nazareth is a school of prayer where we learn to listen, to meditate, to penetrate the deepest meaning of the manifestation of the Son of God, drawing our example from Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

"The Holy Family is an icon of the domestic Church, which is called to pray together. The family is the first school of prayer where, from their infancy, children learn to perceive God thanks to the teaching and example of their parents. An authentically Christian education cannot neglect the experience of prayer. If we do not learn to pray in the family,

it will be difficult to fill this gap later. I would, then, like to invite people to rediscover the beauty of praying together as a family, following the school of the Holy Family of Nazareth".

All very worthy, and one Roman Catholic website adds: "In the holy habitation of Nazareth Jesus transformed family life. Already blessed as God's plan for the whole human race and the first society, the Christian family has been elevated in Christ to a Sacrament, a vehicle of grace and sign of God's presence. The Church proclaims Christian marriage, and the family founded upon it is a vocation, a response to the call of the Lord. In the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we learn the way of love in the School of Nazareth."

Yet even the most cursory reading of the Gospels will reveal that in fact we know almost nothing about the family life of Joseph and Mary and Jesus, apart from the briefest of episodes such as the visit to the Temple of which Luke tells us in this morning's Gospel reading, or the flight into Egypt in Matthew. For the most part, however, the Gospels are silent about the life of Jesus and his family until the moment when his public ministry began, at his baptism by John. Indeed, neither St Mark nor St John refers to his childhood at all.

Why might this be?

I remember being very struck, years ago, when I first read the commentary on St John's Gospel by Dr John Marsh, sometime Principal of Mansfield College, by one rather important observation. Writing of how we may expect to find real events reported in the Gospels when there is clear disparity between the gospels in terms of both content and chronology, he suggests that nowhere are the Gospels records of "what Jesus did next". Rather, he says, the evangelists record historical events – what took place – in order to point the reader towards the deeper significance of those events – what was going on. I have always found this to be a helpful key to understanding the message of the gospels, even though it often takes careful study to recognise the signs of what was going on where contemporary readers and hearers of the gospel would have found it to be second nature. For example: the description of John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel as wearing "a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his

waist” may seem like a simple account of what took place, but contemporary Jewish readers would instantly have recognised what was going on, since the description matches that of the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament – Elijah who was to come again to prepare the way for Messiah.

What, then, can we make of the silence of the evangelists on all but a few events in the childhood of Jesus? The few references to what took place all point in some way to the messianic and divine nature of Jesus, all, in that sense, indicate what was going on. But they are all that we get. We can only assume that nothing else was reported because there was nothing else of any consequence to report, nothing else to mark the child out as in some way special, nothing else that would show what he was to become. All the attempts by the Church to fill in the gaps over the intervening millennia are in reality little more than pious imagination creating what we think the divine childhood and family life should have been like – and often twisting our image of the child Jesus to fit the agenda of a particular time, such as the unmistakably Victorian lines in the carol “Once in Royal David’s City”:

“And through all his wondrous childhood  
He would honour and obey,  
Love and watch the lowly Maiden,  
In whose gentle arms he lay:  
Christian children all must be  
Mild, obedient, good as he.”

How Victorian parents and nannies must have blessed Mrs Alexander for those sugary words – which I notice have been removed, thank goodness, from the New English Hymnal version.

Personally, I find that all the froth that has been whipped up around our image of the Holy Family is a distraction from the true importance of the evangelists’ silence. The fact is, I believe, that the reason for that silence is that in reality the childhood of Jesus and his family were entirely and unremarkably ordinary. We quite rightly talk at length about the birth of the divine child in a stable in Bethlehem as a sign that God had fully laid aside his majesty and power to be born as a completely helpless baby, not in some royal house or hall but in all the simplicity, weakness and even helplessness of ordinary human existence. Why can we not

recognise the same great mystery in the family life into which he was born? Was he never naughty, was he never told off by his mother, was he not subject to the teenage stropiness which is so much a part of growing up as a human being? If not, then our teaching that in the incarnation God became fully human is somehow compromised. Were there never family rows? Did Mary never end up not speaking to her mother because she had not helped with the preparations for Passover? If not, then the family of Nazareth was remarkably untypical of real human life, and God in Jesus did not properly experience what it is to be a human being.

I prefer to suggest to you that in all respects the child Jesus, though God incarnate, grew up as an ordinary boy just like any other and that his family was just like every other family that there has ever been. It must be significant that when Jesus began his ministry there were those who said, "Surely this is the carpenter's son. We know the family." They were clearly astonished. They hadn't seen this coming because there was nothing that they had previously seen that suggested the child was different in any way from all the rest. In this case, what was going on is eloquently conveyed by the lack of any account of what may have taken place.

Such is the great glory of the incarnation – not that Jesus was a very special and highly unusual child in a remarkably calm, peaceful and holy family environment, but that in him God entered real humanity as an ordinary child in a normal family, so that when in his adult ministry and in his death and resurrection God's saving power was made known, He lifted up the ordinary human nature that was His as well as ours, and that He understood so intimately because He had lived it to the full, and brought it into His own divine nature, the reconciliation with our Creator for which we ordinary human beings all long, and which, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God in His infinite love and mercy has made a reality.